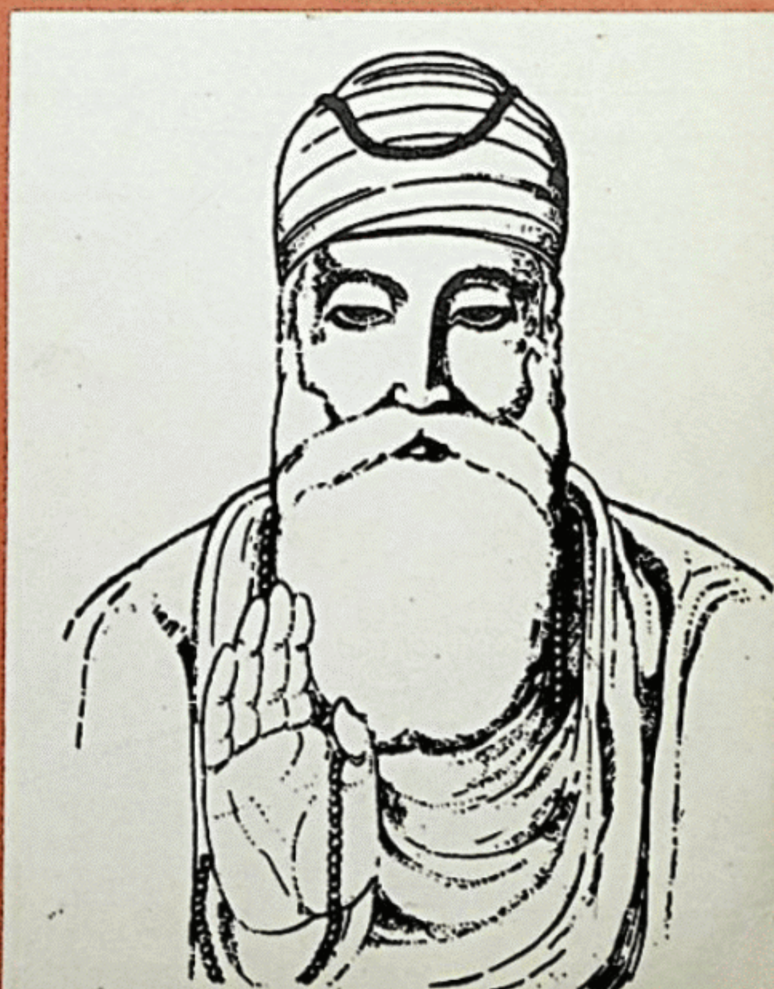
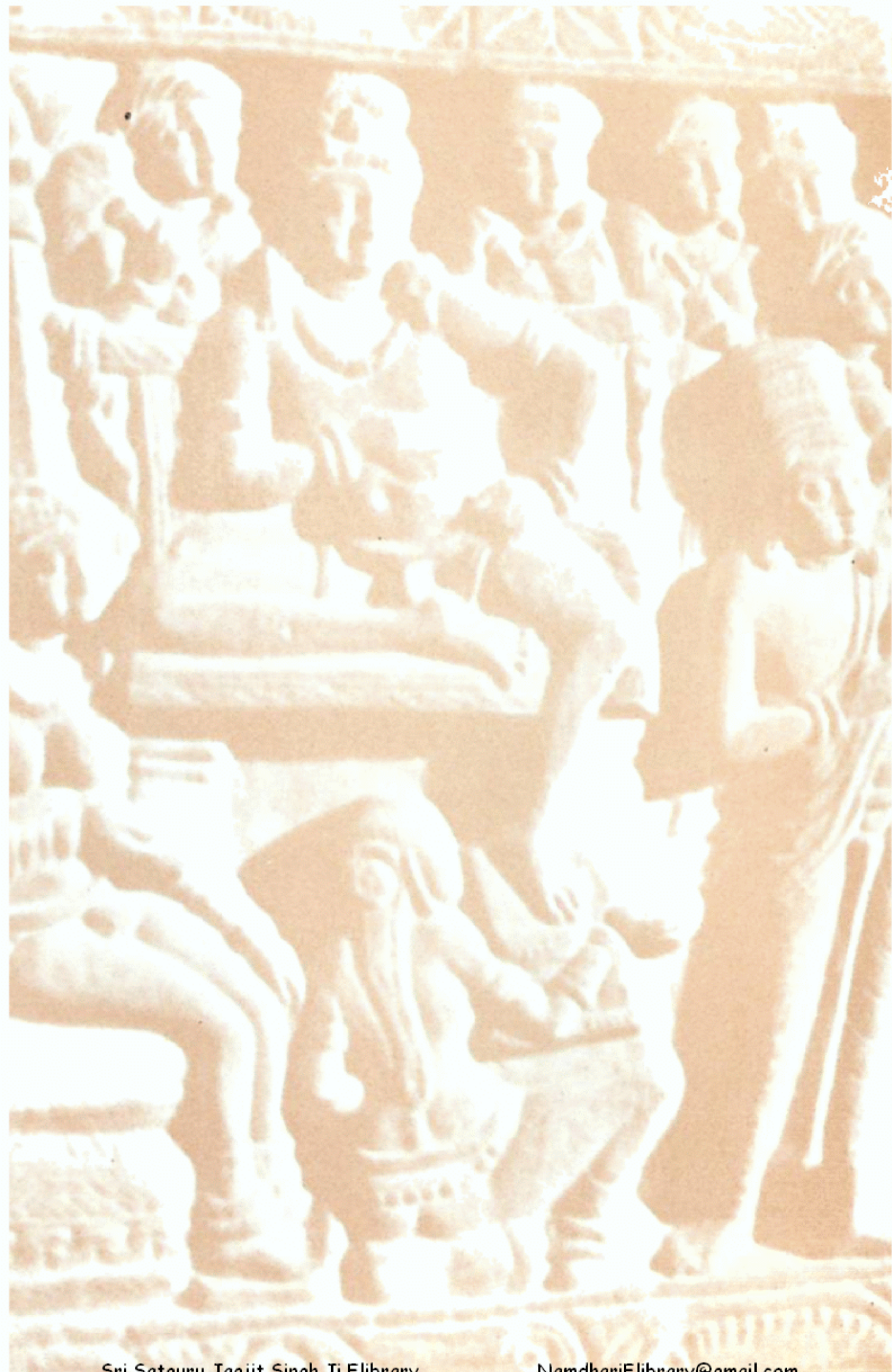


Guru Nanak

Gurbachan Singh Talib



Makers of Indian Literature









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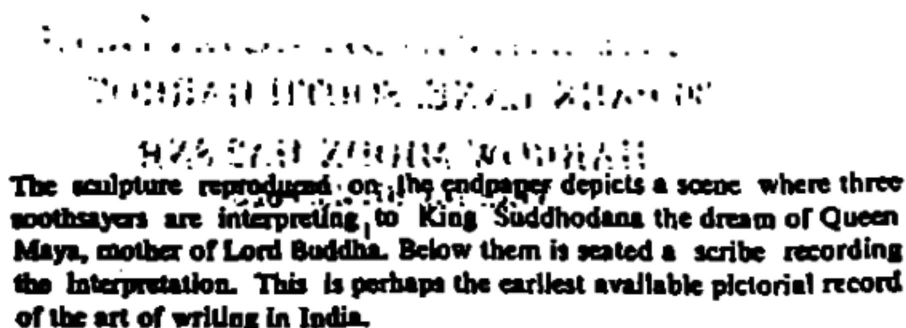
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kirpal singh dhana

GURU NANAK



The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

GURU NANAK

Gurbachan Singh Talib



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Contents

Preface

The selections in English rendering, included in this book, are arranged under several themes. The introductory note given in the beginning will help in a closer understanding and appreciation of their content. To the Indian reader, familiar with the main postulates of Indian philosophy and the tradition of Bhakti, these should not present much difficulty. Even otherwise, they hold universal ethical and spiritual appeal and should easily be grasped.

The renderings from the original sacred texts are the work of the present writer. While remaining close in detailed exposition to the original, they are sought to be given what felicity of expression has been possible in the medium of an alien language, so different in structure and idiom from the Indian languages. The context in each case refers to the *raga*, or *bani* (composition) under which a particular piece has been included in the Granth Sahib, the sacred Scripture of the Sikh faith. The page references are to the 1430-page standard printed edition of this Scripture.

Patiala
1 May, 1984

GURBACHAN SINGH TALIB

1

Life And Teaching

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was a contemporary of some of the great spiritual teachers in other parts of India, such as Kabir and Ravidas from Banaras, Chaitanya from Bengal and Sankaradeva from Assam. While sharing some of the attitudes towards spiritual truths with such saints, as a result of the operation of the time-spirit, his own vision and revelation stand out in his compassion for the suppressed sections of mankind, in his tolerance towards other faiths, especially Islam, and his passionate plea for a just society. In his prophetic vision of an integrated life of action, spiritually and ethically directed, and of a society purged of the evil both of a selfish priest-craft and grasping temporal overlords, along with their tyrannical minions, he remains a pre-eminent teacher of India. The consequence of his creative vision has been that the order that emerged from his teaching, the Sikh faith, shaped his followers into a crusading force, imbued with revolutionary fire, which has profoundly influenced the history of vast areas in the north-west of India. And his influence in the direction of an inexhaustible ethical impulse continues with ever-increasing expansion till this day.

Born of a small Hindu farmer-trader and village revenue official named Mehta Kalu or Kalyan Rai, in Rai Bhoe-ki-Talwandi (later called Nankana Sahib after him), not far from Lahore in Central Panjab (now in Pakistan), he is stated to have been of a contemplative cast of mind from early childhood, and

to have sought company of the holy, and of mystics of various orders, as he grew. He received education at home in Sanskrit and Persian, and Accountancy. But his heart was not in any secular occupation or pursuit, and again and again he gave evidence of being a youth marked out for spiritual life. His parents were naturally worried at finding their only son attracted to a way of life that might make him a mystic or a mendicant, and they tried to settle him in one of the gainful pursuits.

The family arranged his marriage around the age of eighteen, and he had two sons from his wife, Mata (Mother) Sulakhani. Of these sons the elder, Sri Chand, was a recluse by temperament, and founded later the Udasi sect among the Sikhs, whose followers lead a monastic life, and cultivate scholarship in religion and philosophy. In the days of the persecution of the Sikhs in the eighteenth century they, because of their not adopting the traditional Sikh form, escaped the wrath of the rulers, and looked after the Sikh places of worship and spread Sikhism among the masses. The younger son, Lakhmi Das, in course of time, married and his progeny are the Bedi Sahibzadas among the Sikh, held in high esteem and enjoying an exalted status because of their ancestry going back to Guru Nanak.

Even when very young, the people of the [illegible] noticed in him signs of other-worldly pursuits. One of the earliest to notice in the child Nanak something above the ordinary, was the Muslim Bhatti Rajput chief of the place, Rai Bular, who adopted a worshipful attitude towards him. Certain miracles have been attributed to him—while he slept in a field when sent there to tend cattle, the shade of a tree would not move from his face; a cobra protected him from the sun by the shade of its hood, and such others.

For some time he served as a keeper of the grain-store of the Khan of Sultanpur Lodhi, which is in the present Kapurthala district of Punjab. Here Nanak is said to have been increasingly absorbed in meditation on the Divine Being, and the work of the store appeared to have been neglected. Some people complained to the Khan, who ordered an enquiry. On enquiry it was found that the store showed no deficit, but everything was intact, and in the proper quantity. While Guru Nanak was in charge of the store, an atmosphere of holiness prevailed over the place.

It was during this period that Divine revelation came to the youthful Nanak. One morning, while out bathing in the rivulet Bein, flowing by Sultanpur, as was his wont, he is said to have fallen into a state of absorption, and, as related by his early biographers, in that state he was ushered into the Divine Presence. The Supreme Being enjoined on him to go out into the world, and to call mankind to the path of devotion and rectitude. Thereafter, emerging from the rivulet, he went into the town, and the first words he uttered were, "There is no Hindu and no Mussalman," implying that the divisive distinctions of creeds were man-made and had no sanction in the eyes of God. He gave up his earthly possessions, and henceforth decided to devote himself solely to preaching the way of godliness. Soon he had an increasing number of admirers and followers, and was accepted as the Guru or Divine Teacher.

To preach the non-sectarian creed of universal goodwill to an India, torn by inter-religious strife, he decided to travel all over the land. He undertook a number of missionary tours, that in the Sikh parlance are called *Udasis* (*lit.* acts of renunciation.) These journeys took him in various directions—first to the east through centres of Hindu pilgrimage like Kurukshetra, Hardwar and Banaras, and as far as Orissa, Bengal and Assam. In all the places where he went on his journeys lasting for years, he spread among the people, feelings of amity and goodwill, discarding of sectarianism, and taking to worship of the Sole Supreme Being, who is the Creator of all, and in whose eyes all beings are equal. He thus sought to do away with the numerous sectarian distinctions, and to bind all human beings in bonds of love. He visited Muslim centres also, both in India and abroad, going as far as Mecca and Baghdad. To the Muslims, he brought the message of compassion and a life of rectitude. He taught the Hindus and Muslims to look upon each other as brothers, which kind of teaching was lacking in that scene of hate and bigotry. To the yogis he brought the message of spirituality, righteous endeavour, and abjuration of occult powers to perform miracles.

The cardinal principles of Guru Nanak's teachings are a strict monotheism, and the vision of the immanence of God in all creation. Devotion or Bhakti (love of the Supreme Being) forms the pivotal part of the spiritual process in his teaching. The main steps to spiritual ascent emphasized in his teaching are

suniyai (listening to or absorbing holy teaching), *mannei* (reflection) and *dhyana* (deep meditation). To these is added the spirit of service of humanity and compassion, without which the spiritual quest is not complete. While man must engage in the Divine quest and devotion, he must in no way attribute to his own effort the attainment of liberation, but must depend upon Divine grace, which should be sought in a spirit of humility. Humility, as a matter of fact, and banishment of the spirit of egoism are again and again emphsaized in Guru Nanak's teaching. It is stressed, that with egoism harboured in the self, union with God may not be achieved. The end to be sought after, is the cessation of the transmigratory cycle through prayer and service. But man must in no way seek his liberation alone, but must also endeavour to bring it to others by his teaching and example. Like the Bodhisattva in Buddhism, this spirit of altruism and compassion is an essential part of the endeavour of the seeker in Sikhism. He must not turn recluse or flee the world, which is not evil, but is *dharmasâl*, "the place for the practice of *dharma* (righteousness)". Living in this world, man must keep free of its temptations. Temptation is the great impediment to spiritual progress, and must in all situations be resisted. God takes no form or incarnation, Guru Nanak taught, but is envisioned and represented through his holy Name (*Nâm*) and *Shabda* (the holy Word of the Guru).

The Supreme Being is given by Guru Nanak the names *Ek Oankar* (the Sole Supreme Being), and *Kartar* (Creator). He is also called Guru in His aspect as the Divine Enlightener, from whom all spiritual illumination proceeds. A number of attributive names are given to the Supreme Being, such as *Akâl* (the Timeless, the Immortal), *Sachâ* (True, Holy), *Piyârâ* (Beloved), *Niranjan* (Untainted by Maya). Often only a pronominal term such as "He" or "Thou" is used for God. Some attributive names are drawn also from the Muslim tradition, such as *Karim* (Gracious), *Rahim* (Compassionate), *Pak* (Holy), *Parvardigar* (Cherisher), and such others. These are intended not only to acknowledge a convention in the language of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but also to instil the spirit of goodwill and tolerance in an atmosphere of sectarian strife.

With the yogis he held numerous discussions, pointing out the inadequacy of the monastic way of life when the world was

burning in sin and evil. "Go among the people," he told them, "and guide them along the right path. Here you are wasting your lives in mountain caves, smearing your limbs with ashes." These ideals he preached with sincerity and he was venerated and listened to with respect wherever he went.

During these journeys Guru Nanak, although for the time he renounced family life, in no way turned a recluse or a mendicant. His objective was to devote his life to preaching truth and keeping clear of the taint of the world while living in it. For this he used the simile of the lotus, as in the ancient philosophy of India, which, while growing in water, yet escapes being touched by it. At the close of his missionary travels, which lasted about twenty years, he settled down with his family on a small farm along the bank of the river Ravi, in the present district of Gurdaspur. This was given the name Kartarpur or the Creator's Manor. Here he continued his teaching and composed his holy Word called *Gurubani* (the Master's utterance). Engaged thus in bringing to mankind spiritual awakening and the spirit of high rectitude, he left this mortal world at the age of seventy, on the 10th of the dark half of the month of Asuj (Ashvin, September, 1539).

The last days of Guru Nanak's life were spent at his *ashram* of Kartarpur in contemplation, composing the sacred hymns of devotion and holy teaching, and in enlightening any travellers who passed that way. Morning and evening, the small group inhabiting this farm-house would sing hymns to the Divine and time was spent in beneficent action and holy converse. Large numbers from far and near would visit the Guru to have a sight of him and to listen to his teaching. At the small farm-house a kind of hospice was maintained for all who came, and food was provided to them. This tradition, called in Sikh parlance *langar* (community mess), has ever since Guru Nanak's time beer maintained and practised by the Sikhs, and is as a matter ol fact, a part of their religious practice. This place is now in Pakistan. Lying on the western side of the River Ravi is a magnificent Gurudwara, or Sikh temple at this site. As the original site was washed away by the Ravi, along the eastern bank, on the Indian side, is situated the famous Gurudwara of Dera Baba Nanak, established by Guru Nanak's grandson, Baba Dharam Chand. It is now a flourishing town. The ornate Gurudwara

buildings were given the decorative touches in gold plate by command of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Guru Nanak's teaching is centred in goodwill towards all religions, with emphasis on discovering in each faith its fundamental moral and spiritual core. Sectarian stress and empty outward ritual was totally discountenanced by him and he rebuked severely all those who sharpened differences and distinctions. He has denounced empty shells of piety. Between Hindus and Muslims, he maintained an attitude of impartiality and goodwill. To him the Hindu was a good Hindu only in respect of the practice of compassion and righteousness, which lie at the core of the highest and ideal expression of his faith. The Muslim too must practise rectitude and fellow-feeling towards all humanity. When in Mecca, he is related to have been engaged in discussion by some Muslim divines there and asked, who was superior, Hindu or Muslim? The Guru, addressing the Hadjis there, affirmed: Hindu or Muslim without good deeds to bitter end must come.

In a voice throbbing with compassion, he affirmed his resolve to be with the humble and the lowly, and not with the proud and the arrogant, and invoked God's blessing on the land where the humble are cherished. Not in birth lies impurity, but in foul deeds. A person of a caste reckoned high, who harbours within himself the "untouchables" of foul thinking, cruelty, slander and wrath, can no way be called pure. "Those living without God's holy Name", he affirmed, "are the only low-caste." In ecstasy of compassion for those held in contempt for their low-caste, he expressed his feeling:

> Great is the merit of one of the higher castes
> serving God.
> One of the lower castes serving Him may wear
> shoes made from my skin.

Such was his deep sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden in a land where untouchability reigned rampant. In this and other respects, like his strong advocacy of tolerance in religion, Guru Nanak was the harbinger of modern ideas, which then were new, but now, through the spread of humanism and enlightenment given by science, are commonly accepted.

In the course of his travels Guru Nanak is related to have gone, besides the Arab lands, into the high Himalayas and the deep forests of Central India, among thugs and cannibals, ignorant of civilized religious thought. He is said to have crossed over into Sri Lanka, and to have imparted his teaching to Raja Shivnabh there. Away in the Himalayas he awakened the yogis, engaged in meditation and occult pursuits, to the realization of their responsibility as men of a holy way of life to alleviate the suffering and misery of the millions, steeped in ignorance.

A feature, which gives to Guru Nanak a unique place among the spiritual teachers of India, was his deep sense of social justice and his passion for establishing a just society. The indignation and the emphasis of Guru Nanak against social iniquity is powerful and recurring, and in his teaching is brought under castigation social injustice in its various forms, right from that of the king on the throne, through his officials and minions to the greedy and selfish preachers of formal religion.

When Babar invaded India several times, his hordes fell upon the helpless people of this land—pillaging, burning, killing and dishonouring the women of all classes, that fell into their clutches. The Lodhi rulers, steeped in frivolity and levity could hardly defend the people. From this Guru Nanak drew the lesson of the process that shapes history, that a luxurious life of ease goes ill with the heroism needed to defend great empires, and that the price of such a life of ease is utter ruin. Such is the moral law. Especially was his heart in deep suffering at the dishonour of the women of India, both Muslim and Hindu, neither of whom were spared by the ruthless conqueror. Not for one class did he raise his voice of suffering and anguish, but for all, and in his poem on the subject, he has used the word "Hindustan" as the victim, perhaps the first instance in history of such use. There are four poems in the Granth Sahib on this theme. One has been reproduced in the pages following, beginning "Finely coiffeured heads, dyed with vermilion." Some other extracts too are given. Of this vision of a suffering India, Guru Nanak's was the earliest voice in our country.

Besides the lower castes, a section that shared his compassion was woman, held for long ages in a position of subjection to man's dominance and treated with contempt. Guru Nanak

asked: "Why revile her of whom are born the great ones of the earth? Of woman is born woman, and no man could dispense with woman. The Eternal alone is without a female." He denounced the superstition of *Sutak*, according to which a place, where a child-birth has occurred, is held impure for a number of days. Impurity, he averred, lies in the immoral impulses, and the foulness that belongs to our leering with lust, our hearing slander, and the utterance of falsehood, and not in the natural process of birth and death. Food touched by another is not foul, as held by some, but man eating greedily turns it into offal. Such teaching, unique in its forthright truthfulness and conviction, introduced altogether a new element of reform, revolutionary in character, into the Indian social scene, lying inert for centuries, stagnant in static orthodoxy.

Guru Nanak, before the end came, decided to appoint a worthy successor. He chose a devoted disciple, known as Lehna, whom he exalted by a new name, Angad (born of my limb). Lehna had earlier shown himself devoted in spirit and imbued with zeal for the service of mankind. He had helped Guru Nanak in giving final arrangement to some of his compositions. Particularly so is this recorded of *Japuji*, the Sikh morning prayer, enshrining in a group of short poems, the Guru's vision of God, the path of spiritual ascent, the true steps of the holy quest and the spirit of devotion in conjunction with beneficent action. Guru Angad too is credited with having perfected the Gurumukhi script, in which Guru Nanak's compositions were written and which has become the accepted script of the Punjabi language.

In selecting Guru Angad to be his successor, Guru Nanak passed over his own sons, who had thought the holy ministry, the Guruship, to be an hereditary office, and they made a grievance of it. But with Guru Nanak, worthiness and capacity to continue the mission were the prime considerations, and not mere family ties. This tradition of conferring the exalted office of Guruship on the worthiest became firmly established in Sikhism, as it grew. A line of noble teachers emerged as a result, whose teaching resulted not in the addition merely of a new sect to the already existing innumerable sects and sub-sects of India, but in the creation of a revolutionary fervour that strongly influenced the course of the history of northern India,

and brought liberation to millions. Sikhism, which grew out of Guru Nanak's meditations and revelation and was developed by his nine successors in the holy office of Guruship, became a patriotic force and stemmed the incursions of invaders from the north-west. It became also the basis of what was one of the most illustrious states in India between the decline of the Mughal empire and the establishment of British rule, which could be annexed by the powerful British East India company only after the bloodiest battles in its history.

Guru Nanak's was thus the message and career of a prophet who created a new vision, new values and a society with its own ethos and a great role in history. Remaining all his life a quietist teacher, he yet imparted a vision of such dynamism as shook long-established traditions and thrones, and contributed to the world a faith imbued with the spirit of idealism, service and sacrifice.

2

Guru Nanak as Reconciler of Faiths

Guru Nanak's mission was to reconcile the warring faiths, whose mutual conflict had reduced the state of society in India to a sorry spectacle. The strife that had gone on for centuries before him was not only between the two principal faiths, Hinduism and Islam, but also between their sects and sub-sects in a bewildering and unending complexity. This situation so tragic to behold, hid from the vision of men the true aim of the religious life, which was to seek the higher values. This state of affairs has been etched by the great poet Bhai Gurudas in his fragment of Guru Nanak's biographical account:

> Degeneration occurred in the world, leading to the four caste-divisions and enactments about four stages of life;
> The Sanyasis into ten, and the Yogis into twelve sects were divided;
> Various orders of hermits, Jain monks and the unclad recluses set up endless recriminating debate;
> The Brahmins set up strife on the manifold interpretations of Shastras, Vedanta and Puranas;
> The Six Sects proliferated through mutual strife into thirty-six varieties of superstitious falsehood;
> Many engaged in black magic, the search for the elixir of life and in various corruptions;

Truth indivisible was divided and sub-divided into numerous ugly shapes;
Truly Kaliyuga led men into mazes of illusion.
Many were the streams that flowed, and so appeared Mohammad with his companions;
His followers too were divided into seventy-two sects and spread strife in manifold ways;
He made current the Fast, Id and Namaz and imposed a new ritual on the world;
Among the Muslims appeared various orders of religious teachers, of various sects. . . .
Hinduism and Mohammadanism, each was divided into four sects;
Strife was widespread among men, who were filled with egoism, meanness and pride;
Ganga and Banaras were sacred to the Hindu, as were Mecca and Kaaba to the Mohammadan;
The Mohammadan was firm on circumcision, while the Hindu was devoted to the sacred thread and the pastemark;
The names of Ram and Rahim manifest One Reality, but their diversity led men astray from the path of Truth;
All forgot the Veda and the Koran, and followed Satan on the way of greed and wordliness;
Truth was cast aside; and Brahmins and Maulvis clashed each with each bitterly;
None practised the way of release from transmigration.

In this sorry situation, in the words of the poet, "the Lord melting at the wail of humanity sent Guru Nanak on to earth," to bring about peace and reconciliation. The first words that came from him on emerging from the rivulet Bein when the call came to him, as stated earlier, were : "There is no Hindu and no Mussalman,", thus presenting to mankind the image only of undivided humanity, wherein all men are brothers, without the walls created by warring creeds. In his passion to fulfil the divine mission entrusted to him, Guru Nanak travelled far and wide. Everywhere his message was to seek the core of each faith, behind rituals and conventional appearances—the essence of God-consciousness, the way to a noble life and the brotherhood

of man. Some believe that Guru Nanak was a synthesizer of faiths. However, there is no evidence of this in his *bani.* He was, on the other hand, a great reconciler of religions. The significance of this is that he did not call upon the votaries of any religion to compromise the fundamentals of their faith, nor did he create an amalgam in which various parts drawn from different religious might be mixed. Let each person, he averred, sincerely follow the faith that he professes and be loyal to it. Only let him practise it in a way in which the essential universality of his faith and belief and the spirit of humanity finds expression. This was a grand attempt at propagating sovereign universal ethical qualities. Addressing obviously some Muslim groups in the *Vār* in *Raga Majh* he made the following affirmations. Who is a true Muslim? he asked, and proceeded to give the answer:

Musalman kahawan mushkal

Hard it is to become a true Muslim;
Only one truly such may be so called.
His first action, to love the way of the holy;
Second, to shed off his heart's filth as on the grindstone.
One professing to be a guide to Muslims must shed the
illusion of life and death.
To God's will must he submit;
Obey God and efface his self.
Such a one shall be a blessing for all,
And be truly reckoned a Muslim.

(*Vār Majh*, Guru Nanak, p. 141)

Again, what should be the articles of a Muslim's piety? Not the conventional five prayers etc., only, but qualities of lofty conduct :

Mehar masit sidak musalla haq halal Koran

Make thy mosque of love of humanity;
Thy prayer-carpet of sincerity;
Thy Koran of honest and approved endeavour;
Thy circumcision of modesty;

Thy Ramadan fast of noble conduct—
Thus shalt thou be a true Muslim.
Make good deeds thy Kaaba;
Truthfulness thy preceptor:
Thy Namaz and Kalima pure actions;
Thy rosary what pleases God—
Thus wilt thou be honoured at the last reckoning,
Five are the prayers, five the hours to perform them;
Five their different names;
What are the true prayers?
The first is truthfulness; the next honest endeavour,
The third, prayer offered to God for good of all;
The fourth is a sincere heart;
The fifth, devotion to God;
One whose Kalima is good actions is alone a true Muslim.
Saith Nanak : All who are false within in the end prove of no worth.

(*Vār Majh*, Guru Nanak, p. 140-141)

While to the ordinary person Hinduism and Islam appeared as two separate creeds, almost irreconcilable, Guru Nanak adjured all men to look upon them as just two ways to elevate the self, without rancour or hate :

Rah dowai ik janai soi sijhasi

He who knows the two paths to be one, will alone find fulfilment;
The evil slanderer and caviller must burn in hell-fire;
The whole universe is Divine in essense—
Merge yourself into Truth.

(*Raga Majh*, Guru Nanak, p. 142)

Rah dowai Khasam eko jan

Know the Lord to be One, even though the paths be twain.
Through God's Word learn His commandment:
Give equal place in thy heart to all human forms and castes!
Saith Nanak, only the One is worthy of worship.

(*Raga Gauri*, Guru Nanak, p. 223)

3

The Vision Sublime of the Supreme Being

Guru Nanak's teaching is monotheistic in character, with the mystical vision of the harmony of all existence and a passionate yearning for union of the self with the Infinite. This yearning expresses itself in the idiom of love, but when not distinctly of the nature of the poetry of love, it takes the form of the soul's quest for the vision of cosmic harmony and the realm sublime wherein the eternal moral law reigns. In a poem forming part of the morning prayer—chant *Japuji*, the entire universe is envisioned by Guru Nanak as singing the paean of the Divine laudation. The reader is carried along with its undulating musical movement through rich imagery, drawn from the classical source of Indian spirituality. This somewhat long piece is reproduced below in part :

So dar keha so ghar keha jit bahi sarb samâle

What the Portal, what the Mansion where from Thy seat
Thou all creation dost cherish!
Endless the instruments, the notes, the players who laud
Thee.
Innumerable are the ragas and the symphonies,
The musicians orchestrating Thy praises!
Air, water, fire laud Thee;
Dharamaraja lauds Thee at his Court-Portal.

Chitra and Gupta, recorders of men's deeds, chant Thy
laudation,
Whose records Dharamaraja considers.
Shiva, Brahma and Devi—all laud Thee,
Shining in the splendour given by Thee;
Indra on his throne in company with deities,
Yogis in God-absorption,
And devotees in contemplation.
Men of continence, charity, contentment,
Indomitable heroes—all chant Thy praises.
Men of learning, mighty seers—
All laud Thee in holy texts age after age.
Fairies, supremely ravishing, of heaven, earth
and the nether world—
All sing Thy praises.
The jewels created by Thee laud Thee
With the sixty-eight holy water-edges.
Heroes of supreme might;
All four sources of creation—
All raise the song of Thy praise.
So also regions, continents and the universe entire,
Propped on Thy support.
Only such are inspired to laud Thee, as win Thy
pleasure:
These be Thy devotees, dyed in joy of Thee.

(*Japuji*, XXVII)

Another poem from *Japuji*, touching the peak of sublimity, unfolds the vision of the realm eternal (*Sach Khand*) where abides the Creator alone with His devotees. Here live only the emancipated, the purest souls, and a vision of the infinitude of the universe is unfolded to the spiritual sight. This poem stands towards the close of *Japuji*, and brings up a kind of crescendo of the vision that is shaping there:

Karam-Khand ki bāni jor

Might is the expression of the sphere of Grace –
Those abiding therein are alone with God.
Its denizens are heroes of supreme might,

Inspired by God-consciousness.
In that sphere abide numberless heroines like
Sita of surpassing praise
And beauty indescribable.
Those to God united,
Suffer not mortality nor guile.
In that sphere abide devotees worlds upon worlds,
cherishing God ever in their hearts,
In everlasting bliss.
God Himself abides in the Sphere of Eternity:
Over His creation He casts His glance of grace.

(*Japuji*, XXXVIII)

In a poem with a symmetrical structure, is expressed the urge for devotion to the Lord and limitless spiritual hunger. All attractions of the senses, ambition and even the miraculous attainments acquired through Yoga are rejected in the passion for prayer and devotion. This poem in *Sri Raga* runs thus:

Moti ta mandir usrai ratnn ta hoi jaraoo

Palaces built all of pearl,
With gems studded;
Plastered with musk, saffron, aloe and sandalwood,
Fragrant to fill the heart with joy—
Man, lest such spectacles beguile thee to forget God,
To put Him out of thy mind!
May I be consumed in flames, should I live without the
Lord!
My Master have I consulted—
For man, in God alone is true refuge.
On floors, with gems and rubies strewn all around;
With luxurious beds, studded all with rubies;
In dalliance with ravishing beauties,
With faces sparkling as gems—
Man, lest such spectacles beguile thee to forget God,
To put Him out of thy mind.
Should I attain perfection in yogic faculties,
Invoking miraculous powers;
Should I vanish, and manifest myself at will,

Inspire mankind to my veneration and worship—
Thou foolish heart, lest these wonders
Beguile thee to forget God,
To put Him out of thy mind.
Should I attain royal majesty,
Be master of hosts, and lord of thrones;
Should my writ run over the earth—
Nanak, all this is void, of little worth.
Man, lest such vanity beguile thee to forget God,
To put him out of my mind.

(*Sri Raga* I, p. 14)

In a sequel, parallelling the symmetrical structure of the piece given above, wonder at the majesty and glory of the Divine vision is expressed:

Koti koti meri arja pavan piyan apiyao

Were I to live years, millions upon millions;
Were I in severe penance of seclusion, never to see sun or moon;
Were sleep to visit me not in thought even;
Even thus would Thy greatness still elude me; what measure might I give of Thy name?
I utter what my poor understanding may grasp, thus alone through Thy grace may I reveal Thy greatness.
Were I in my austerities beaten like *Kusa* grass, ground down like grain, burnt in fire to mingle in the ash-heap;
Even thus would Thy greatness still elude me; what measure might I give of Thy Name?
Were I to hover on bird's wings, and sweep the expanse of the firmament;
Were my powers to make me invisible to the eye; were I in my penance to live without food or drink;
Even thus would Thy greatness still elude me; what measure might I give of Thy Name?
Nanak, a million weights of paper, written over with learning and devotion.

With ink in unending stream, and with the motion of the wind to scribe—
Even these might not express Thy greatness;
What measure might I give of Thy Name?

(*Sri Raga*, pp. 14-15)

A high peak of the spiritual experience is wonder at beholding the uniqueness of the Divine Being, who transcends all existence. In a poem in *Raga Suhi* this wonder finds expression through imagery of gold and the gold-tester:

Koun taraji kawan tula Tera kawan saraf bulawān

Where be the scales and who the weighman and who the gold-tester to comprehend Thee?
Where is the Master to whom I may supplicate for initiation?
Who may measure Thy worth, Lord?
My Beloved, what know I of Thy extent?
Thou fillest the oceans and the continents with Thy Presence.
Thou mayst be valued in the scales of the mind, by the weighman soul; devotion to Thee the gold-tester;
After weighing the Beloved in the heart, may my mind find rest.
He alone the Buyer and Seller; He the Sole Merchant.
Sealed in the blindness of ignorance,
Among lowest of the lowly, and stranger to Him,
Shaken by every whiff of desire—
Such is Nanak's company—how may he in stubborn ignorance find the Lord?

(*Suhi* 9, p. 730)

The spectacle of nature in its infinite variety moves the Guru's imagination to behold in it the presence of God, its creator. The hymn given below is believed to have been composed by Guru Nanak at Jagannath Puri, the temple of Vishnu in Orissa, on beholding the *arati* or prayer-offering performed with a large number of lamps waved before the deity on a salver. To the Guru's vision not only the temple priests, but the entire

creation is engaged in offering worship to the Creator—the sky, the stars and the sun and the moon along with the vegetation of the earth and the fragrant breezes wafted from the mountains are perpetually engaged in a cosmic act of worship. In the original this hymn has a sublimity that defies analysis. In the English rendering given below a feeble attempt has been made to suggest some of the power of the original:

Gaganmai thal Ravi-Chand deepak taraka mandal janak moti

Placed on the salver of heaven are the lamps, sun and moon.
With the bright pearls of the constellations—
The offering:
Fragrant mountain breezes Thy incense, the wind Thy fan; the entire blossoming vegetation Thy flower-offering;
Wonderful is this *Arati* of the entire creation to Thee, Thou Annuller of transmigration:
Divine spiritual harmony
Thy loudation orchestrates.
Thousands Thy eyes, Thy shapes, yet invisible Thou remainst;
Thousands Thy lotus feet; of thousand waves thy wafted fragrance,
Yet invisible, wonderful Thy essence!
Thy light in all creation—Thou who art Light!
Thy effulgence illuminating the visible universe!
The Lord's Word alone makes manifest the light!
Submission to Thy will the highest prayer!
My soul yearns for the touch of Thy lotus feet fragrant,
In thirst unquenchable.
Bestow on the Chatrik Nanak the water of
Thy Bounty;
In Thy Name grant him endless abode!

(*Kirtan Sohila*, p. 13)

(This hymn is originally recorded in the *Raga Dhanasari.*)
The vision of the harmony of Universal Being, wherein all

that exists is seen as the very embodiment of God, finds repeated expression in Guru Nanak's spiritual experience. This he expresses through varied imagery, in the manner mystical poetry the world over. The two pieces given below will help to illustrate the depth of such experience:

Antari behari avar na koe

The Divine (like the lotus) is in the water, yet untouched
by it;
Its light penetrates this water entire;
None is near, none far;
I find it ever near, and chant its praises,
Nothing else exists inside or outside (man);
All happens as He wills it;
Listen Bharthari: This is what Nanak says after contemplation.

(*Asa Ashtpadiyan* I, p. 411-12)

Āpe māchhī machhlī āpe pānī jāl

Himself the fisher and the fish, Himself the water and the net.
Himself the net's weight, Himself the ruby therein caught.
Sister-friend! the Beloved in numerous ways is given to disporting:
The woman of blessed matrimony ever with Him has bliss—
Look to my poor state!
Nanak in humility states:
Thou art the Lake and the Swan on it.
Thou too the lotus and the lotus-buds:
Behold Thy loveliness and blossom with joy.

(*Sri Raga* 25, p. 23)

4

The Principal Compositions of Guru Nanak

The Underlying Philosophical Concepts

Implicit in Guru Nanak's poetry is a philosophy, which, though not expressed in a systematic manner, is nevertheless clear in its outlines. There is the conception of the Supreme Being both in His Unattributed and Attributed aspects as the Absolute and the Creator. As the Creator, He is the object of of worship and love, and is the upholder of the moral values of the universe, known to Indian thought as Dharma. This Dharma is centred in truth and the universal good, and though challenged again and again by evil, shall ultimately triumph. Guru Nanak in the *Ramkali Vār* has affirmed this truth: *Kur nikhuttai Nanaka orak sach rahi* (Evil shall be destroyed; goodness alone shall last). This is, it may be noticed, in accord with the ancient Indian truth *Satyamera Jayate nanritam*, (Truth shall triumph, not falsehood).

There is then expressed the truth about the spiritual path. The self that has assumed human incarnation after wandering through numerous births, must engage in devotion to escape from the cycle of births and deaths and attain *mukti* or *moksha* (liberation). But the way to this is neither any form of yoga praxis nor pure renunciation, but the path known as *Sahaj*. This would entail devotion to the Name Divine, Bhakti or love of God and doing good in the human world. This last would mean

that the moral law can in no way be disregarded, but must form part of the spiritual process. The earth, as stated in *Japuji*, is looked upon as "the theatre of righteousness" (*dharmasal*).

Another element constituting this philosophy is the sovereignty of love—love for the Divine Beloved. With regard to the retribution for actions of the human life, the twin but related laws of Karma and Grace are in operation. Evil must in all cases be punished, for which the concept of Dharmaraj or the righteous judge has been taken from Indian thought. For man there is a way of escape from evil-doing which in the human situation is inevitable. While man must ponder his actions, he must beg of God forgiveness and grace. Grace, which implies Divine mercy for contrition and devotion, must descend, should the heart be sincere in seeking it. As Guru Nanak has said, using a simile from common life, sincere devotion burns away the accumulated sins of life like a tiny spark of fire burning away vast loads of wood (*Lakh marhiyan kari ekathe ek rati le bhahi*, *Asa*, p. 358) Echoing Guru Nanak, the devotee-poet Bhai Gurdas has averred: "Should man take one step towards the Lord, the Lord advances a million steps towards him." (*Charan saran Guru ek painda aye chal Satguru kot painda agei hoe leit hain*).

Operative in the universe is the Divine Order called after the Arabic, *Hukam* (*Lit*. Command). This is a vast concept, comprehending the law of retribution and grace, from whose operation nothing in the universe is exempt. To know the operation of this law is to conquer egoism, which is the source of all evil. Besides, certain postulates of Indian philosophy like the three qualities of Maya, which is the illusion leading men astray and the five sources of evil and such others, are embodied in this philosophy.

These philosophical ideas find expression in Guru Nanak's poetry not, as said earlier, in a systematic manner as an explicit statement as, for example, is done in the Gita, but in the form of poetic formulations. The total philosophical vision has to be taken in after a close study of the *Bani* or compositions of Guru Nanak and his spiritual successors.

The Compositions

A number of Guru Nanak's verse-creations are in the form of quatrains arranged in groups of four. They have an internal unity and consistency, though over the entire range of such compositions arranged under a raga the theme or the emphasis may change from group to group. The themes are ethical, philosophical or devotional and in their totality make up the cosmic vision or an ethical philosophy. More elaborate in form are the *Chhants*, essentially lyrical pieces, which are suffused in emotion and are musical. There is an involution in the concluding part of the second and the first half of the third line. This pattern has been followed in the *Chhants* of Guru Nanak's successors also. An excellent example of a *Chhant* is the poem in the section "The Ethical Quest" beginning with the words: *Tun sun harna kallya ki wariye rata Rama.* Slokas which are found interspersed among the *Vars* as also in a small collection towards the close of the volume of the Granth Sahib, are brief aphoristic formulations on ethical or philosophical themes.

Japuji (The Holy Chant) is the principal composition of Guru Nanak. It has been prescribed for recitation at early dawn, in the hour called in the Sikh parlance *amrit vela* (the ambrosial hour). Its constant recitation is believed to confer the boon of liberation on the seeker and to keep away the malignant influence of evil spirits. It is preceded by *Mul Mantra*, a string of phrases containing the concept of the Supreme Being in His Unattributed aspect. *Mul Mantra* is recited on all occasions when divine blessing is sought to be invoked, as also at the time of initiation of a person into the Sikh faith. In essence it is a monotheistic concept of the Supreme Being, who is known in the Sikh tradition as *Ek Oankar* (One Sole Supreme Being). *Mul Mantra*, followed by *Japuji*, stands at the head of the Granth Sahib. *Japuji* consists of thirty-eight poems called *pauris* and two groups of *slokas*, one at the opening and the other at the close. In *Japuji* is expressed in short poems, aphoristic in character and compact in expression, the idea of the Supreme Being, His might, the steps leading the self to Him, the law of Karma and Grace, and finally the five *Khands* or stages of the ascent of the self to complete absorption in the Formless Supreme Being (*Nirankar*). The closing stanzas are sublime in

their vision. Interspersed in *Japuji* is a great hymn of Divine laudation, reproduced in English rendering in this book and four short stanzas containing a critique of *hatha-yoga.*

Another composition of Guru Nanak intended for morning recitation in large congregations is *Asa-di-Vār*. This is a disquisitional poem, containing twenty-four stanzas interspersed with slokas or groups of couplets. The stanzas posit the concept of the Supreme Being and trace the devotional path of ascent and grace. The slokas, a few of which are also by Guru Angad, Guru Nanak's spiritual successor, are a flaming denunciation of the falsehood and hypocrisy prevalent in the practice of religion and of society. In these slokas by the fire of the spiritual vision is burnt away falsehood, so that it may be taken as a kind of sulphurous flame to purge the mind of false religiosity and hypocrisy. Under castigation are the ritual piety of food, the supposed potency of the sacred thread without the restraint of passions, the supposed impurity of *Sutak*, and the low status accorded to woman. Also castigated is false charity based on earnings of sin.

Another *Vār* Composed by Guru Nanak is in *Majh*. While it is as powerful in awakening the mind to realization of the true character of the spiritual life, it is less known than the *Vār* in *Asa*. A special feature of it, particularly in the slokas, is the discountenance of claims to perform miracles as the evidence of holiness, castigation of tyrannical worldly power and an apocalyptic warning of the doom that must overtake it. In this *Vār* too is contained an adjuration to the bigoted among the Muslims to broaden and humanize their conception of the practice of religion. Some portions from this *Vār* are cited in this book.

Oankar in *Raga Ramkali Dakhni* is modelled on the form of an acrostic to express deep philosophical and ethical teaching. This too is a long poem in stanzas. In *Raga Maru* in the composition called *Solahe* (Sixteen-stanza poems) a similar teaching is contained.

One of the principal compositions of Guru Nanak is *Siddha-Goshti*, also in *Raga Ramkali*. It consists of seventy-three stanzas containing an abstruse discussion on the practice of Yoga and Guru Nanak's corrective to it. This takes the form of a dialogue between Guru Nanak and certain Yogis or Siddhas. While the Yogis maintain the supremacy of *hatha yoga* and its praxis,

Guru Nanak points out the supremacy of devoted meditation or Nām which is the true Yoga. This composition is difficult to follow without deep concentration. It has fine dramatic touches in its dialogue and proceeds in the form of queries by the Yogis and Guru Nanak's answers thereto.

There is a group of four poems, in the Ragas *Asa* and *Telang*, expressing the anguish of Guru Nanak's soul over the barbarities perpetrated by Babar's hordes over the people of Punjab and dishonour of the women-folk of India. These are deeply human and express a philosophy of history centred in ethical considerations. Suffering is the outcome of a life of frivolity. Only those devoted to the public good have the right to rule. Inscrutable, though just, are the ways of God, who sends down scourges like Babar on people who have lived in forgetfulness of ethical duty.

Alahuniyan (Dirges) in *Raga Wadhans* is a string of deeply moving poems on the theme of death. Death is an inevitable fact, bringing grief to the survivors. Guru Nanak has not skirted this fact, which is poignantly expressed, but at the same time, as in his compositions elsewhere, is laid down the way to triumph over this melancholy fact. That way is to live a life in remembrance of God, and to act so as to win His approval. Thus will the terror of death vanish. *Alahuniyan* is the ritual mourning process in Punjab over the dead. This popular form of folk poetry is here adapted to express a deeply human and sublime vision of death and the escape from its terror.

The last to find mention is *Bara-Mah* or the song of seasons in the *Raga Tukhari*. In the Granth Sahib too it stands towards the close of the Sacred Volume. This deeply lyrical composition is modelled on a current Hindi-Punjabi folk mode, tracing the moods of the love-sick female (*birahan nayaka*) through the passing seasons. Guru Nanak has adapted this mode to the expression of the yearning of the human self, separated from God, for union. The symbols are drawn from the poetry of mundane love, but are made the vehicle for the expression of spiritual yearning. In rhythms whose secret of appeal defies analysis, the lonely female, as the human self is imaged, passes through the hot months and the rains and the dark lonely nights of winter. Ultimately it finds union in Phalgun (March-April)

as spring breaks out, symbolical of attaining the goal of realization after life-long single-minded devotion.

These themes are found scattered over the entire creative work of Guru Nanak and are treated under various captions in this book. This will help to bring out the many-sided appeal of his personality.

5

Language and Influence

In Guru Nanak's compositions, words drawn from several language-traditions of India are found used. Apart from Braji Hindi, which was in general use in the Punjab and its neighbouring areas for the expression of philosophical and romantic themes, words drawn from Sindhi, Haryanavi, and Rajasthani are found used, indicating the Guru's sojourn in those parts, and the frequent visits to him of seekers after spiritual truths from there. A prominent feature is the use of Persian and Arabic words in their forms current in Punjab. Guru Nanak's close acquaintance with the Muslim tradition is evidenced by his use of the Muslim theological terminology, whenever the context demands it. Particularly striking is his use of certain Persian and Arabic terms to express the spiritual experience. Thus, where for grace *prasad* from the Indian tradition is used, of more frequent occurrence are *mehr* (Persian), and *karam* and *nadar* (both Arabic). The last is the puristic enunciation of what in popular parlance is pronounced as *nazar* (glance, that is, glance of grace). Such a point helps to emphasize his total freedom from bias in the use of language, even in the most intimate contexts. In evidence frequently also is his use of the terminology of yoga, which he has examined and discountenanced.

The original *bani* (the holy Word) is in Punjabi with a westerly idiom, tinged with medieval Hindi made current by the

spiritual teachers of Northern India of the ages of Muslim domination. This language is quite intelligible to the modern reader, unlike Middle English or even the work of a poet like Chaucer. Except for the flavour of the phraseology of an earlier day and the esoteric, mystical vision embodied in it, it is fairly intelligible to the average Punjabi or to one attuned to the tradition of medieval Hindi poetry.

A number of poetic traditions germane to old Hindi poetry, and the folk poetry of Punjab have been adopted. All this poetry is in rhyme, to facilitate memory and recitation, for it is meant to be repeated by the devotees for personal edification and spiritual uplift, individually and in assemblies. Among the main forms are *Chaupada* (group of four quatrains), *Chhant* (lyrics), *Ashtpadi* (eight-stanza poems or octets), and *Vâr* (long disquisitional poems, adaptations of the old ballad). Another form, *Patti* (Acrostic) has been used for imparting moral and spiritual edification. Guru Nanak's successors in the holy office have adopted a few more of the popular forms of poetry. Except for the opening composition in the Granth Sahib, *Japuji*, the rest of the *bani* of Guru Nanak, as in most medieval Indian poetry, is arranged according to the Indian musical ragas and to this day is sung by minstrels. Interspersed among the longer poems are *Slokas*, which are groups of couplets expressing an ethical, spiritual or philosophical vision. Towards the close of the Granth Sahib, a number of Guru Nanak's Slokas are found collected in one place, along with those of his successors in the holy office of Guruship and some bhaktas or saints.

Guru Nanak's teaching is enshrined in imagery drawn from the experiences of everyday life, to stir man's imagination and the deeper layers of his heart to feel inspired to enter upon the moral and spiritual quest and to shun the lure of the world. A number of verses of Guru Nanak have passed into common sayings in Punjab providing to the people aphorisms which should illumine the mind. One such is *Sahaj pakkei so mitha*, implying the sovereignty of poise and patience. Another is, *Nadar upatthi je karei sultanan ghah karaenda*, warning man against the blindness born of arrogance of power. A famous adage is *Vidya vichari tan par-upkari*, contemplation of learning should lead to service of humanity. *Dhaul dharma daya ka put*, righteousness is born of compassion, *Nanak dukhiya sab sansar*,

the whole world is in grip of sorrow. On careful study many more such aphorisms may be culled from the *Bani* of Guru Nanak, as of his spiritual successors. Particularly on the theme of the evanescence of worldly glory and the fall of the arrogant and the proud, his expression is rich and resonant. This among other features is what makes him a great moral teacher.

It would be unjust to sum up Guru Nanak's composition as only poetry. These compositions are God-inspired and have according to the Sikh devoted view-point, the nature of revelation. To understand the totality of their power and appeal they should be studied as such. But Guru Nanak has in one place used the Arabic equivalent of poet, *Shair* to designate himself and in another called himself *dhadi*, or the bard, singing hymns laudatory to the Divine Being. While the average reader, even when his approach is not devotional, must try nevertheless to enter into the loftier aspects of Guru Nanak's message, he would find much in it that is also of the nature of great poetry. Guru Nanak's poetry helped create a revolution in the minds of millions, and hence is also of the nature of prophecy. This two-fold approach would help best in appreciating the greatness of his personality and the vision enshrined in his compositions.

The terminology of Indian philosophy, such as fell within the purview of his exposition of *Brahm-Gian* is used with mastery and intimate knowledge. The Indian mythological and Puranic lore is used for illustrative purposes, particularly in emphasizing ethical teaching. The epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are in this context drawn upon, along with the Krishna legend and other Puranic myths. With regard to Guru Nanak's use of language it may generally be stated that in the more purely metaphysical portions of his compositions he has used the current language of philosophy in northern India, that is Braji Hindi. Thus, his great dialogue with the yogis (*Siddha Ghoshti*) is predominantly in Hindi, which while the idiom tends to be esoteric in keeping with the theme of yoga and *Brahm-Gian* is by no means archaic. In language structure it is not different from the grammar current in the circles of Sadhus and Yogis. Where the theme is devotion or bhakti, drawing upon the intimate experience of love, the language used is his native Punjabi with the westerly cast. If proportions were to be fixed, the more predominant idiom in Guru Nanak's composition is Punjabi.

In course of time, in the hands of his successors in the holy ministry, these proportions tended to be varied, though the thematic division of the language remained the same. Love and compassion have found deep and intimate expression in Punjabi at the hands of the Gurus up to Guru Arjan Dev. With Guru Teg Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh, Hindi is found almost exclusively used.

There is nothing comparable to Guru Nanak's compositions in Punjabi in sublimity and greatness. While before his time, except for Farid, there hardly is any great poet in Punjabi, after his time scores of prominent Punjabi poets, Hindus as well as Muslims may be met with. Apart from the Gurus, in the Sikh tradition is found the great savant and poet Bhai Gurudas, whose mastery of the Punjabi language is breath-taking in its range and felicity. So also is the mastery of the Bhatts or Bards, along with the rababis, Satta and Balvand, whose compositions have found a place in the holy Granth Sahib. They followed the particular style and tradition of their class, which used the Punjabi language with marvellous effect. Guru Nanak himself, commenting in verse on a couplet and a *shabda* of Farid, has employed Punjabi, as in the original composition, and supplemented the vision of Farid.

Guru Nanak's expression tends to be highly compact, and often the words appear to be too narrow a vehicle for the meaning. This introduces an element of difficulty in the interpretation of his poetry. Added to this is its classical style, now lost. The reader has to be attuned to it, before he can enter fully into its meaning and appeal. Helpful in interpretation, however, is the Guru's use of symbols, which are drawn partly from the countryside of the Punjab, and partly from the established tradition of Indian poetry. For example, the love-tormented wife, her loneliness in the home of the husband, who is away, the unsympathetic mother-in-law, all are transmuted into spiritual symbols. The *chatrik*, the *koel*, the deer, the fish, the *chakor*, the snake, the elephant, the tiger and the hound and many other sombols are employed to emphasize moral and spiritual truths. Such also are the lotus and the swan for pure souls; the ocean, in its vastness, for God; the hours of day and night for the evanescent period of man's life; the seasons, particularly Savan with its showers; the bridal make-up symbolizing

external ritualism of creeds and so on.

Besides being a great spiritual and moral teacher, Guru Nanak is a supreme poet, who has used the language of the folk tradition with mastery and effect, and stirred a spiritual and cultural revival over vast areas and among the masses in numerous corners of India. Current trends of folk poetry such as *Patti* (acrostic) and *Bara-mah* (the Months or Seasons) he has used to embody spiritual teaching, and romantic yearning to symbolize the urge for union with God. Learning he regarded as worse than useless if it be used for disputatious purposes, and for befuddling the simple masses. In this respect he held the learned among the Hindus and Muslims and the Yogis equally guilty. In one of his *shabdas* he has affirmed: *Vidya Vichari tan par-upkari*, one who truly contemplates learning, must engage in doing good to others. Cartloads of books, he said, are an absurd load on the mind without remembrance of the holy Name of God.

6

Guru Nanak as Poet

Guru Nanak's teachings, unlike those of many other teachers of faiths, are preserved in poetry of his own composition, in the Scripture of the Sikh faith, known as the Granth Sahib. These poetical compositions, in several metres and forms known to Indian poetry in the vernaculars of northern India, are recorded under the various ragas, according to which these may be sung. This was the customary way to write out compositions of a lyrical character, which were principally meant to be set to music. Guru Nanak's compositions are sung in the Sikh religious assemblies in groups or by trained musicians. The approved mode to sing them is to keep to the prescribed ragas, to the accompaniment of musical instruments. It is estimated that in Guru Nanak's compositions there are approximately one thousand verse units of various lengths. These may broadly be divided into three categories: those that are primarily philosophical and meditative; those that are lyrical and devotional; and those mainly ethical. But such a division is by no means exclusive or absolute, for in the same unit or hymn called in Sikh religious parlance *shabda* the three categories tend to mingle, with varying emphasis in each case.

While a number of *shabdas* are recorded without any specific title with only the raga indicated, some others bear specific titles indicating planned composition. The principal such are, *Japu* or *Japuji*, at the opening of the Granth Sahib, *Pahre* (The

Hours of Day and Night, symbolizing the human life); *Siddha Goshti* (Dialogue with the Yogis); *Ounkar* in raga *Ramkali Dakhni* (this is an ethico-philosophical composition of deep import); and *Patti* (Acrostic). Besides, there are some *Vārs*, or long disquisitional compositions, consisting of *pauris* (stanzas); and *slokas* (couplets), containing verses of Guru Nanak's composition. The two *Vārs*, principally associated with Guru Nanak are in the ragas *Asa* and *Majh*.

The themes under which the compositions of Guru Nanak are considered in this book are: The Moral Quest, The Voice of Compassion, The Social Conscience, The Heart Throbbing for India, Ecstasy of Divine Love, On Yoga, and others. In "The Moral Quest", the temptations and pitfalls in the way of the moral life are envisioned; man is warned against them, and exhorted to keep to the path of rectitude.

"The Voice of Compassion" outlines, through the symbol of the hours of day and night, the tragic state of man's life, passed away from godliness, in temptation. Herein again moral exhortation is mingled with deep compassion. Similar is the theme in "The Social Conscience".

In "The Heart Throbbing for India" the voice of patriotism raised for the suffering humanity of India.

In "The Ecstasy of Divine Love" are included poems of yearning for union of the self with the Divine Spouse. The human self, in the spiritual quest, arriving at the point of fulfilment in God, feels a joy, for the expression of which no symbol could be as adequate as the joy of conjugal union. In the tradition of Indian mystical poetry, wherein the questing self is symbolized as the love-sick female (*Birahan*), suffering the torment of separation from the beloved Spouse, Guru Nanak has expressed the spiritual yearning through this symbol. There are a number of short lyrics, suffused with emotion, expressive of this theme. Two longer sequences too are cited in part—"Call of the Divine Spouse" and "Bara Mah" (The Seasons). In the former, the human self, symbolized as the thoughtless youthful bride, filled with pride, wrapped in sleep of ignorance, is slowly awakened by her spouse, the Divine Lord, to have bliss with Him. The ecstasy and passion of this sequence have in it something akin to the exquisite marital joy of the "Song of Solomon" in the Old Testament. Between God and the self subsists the

relationship of love, and God is herein shaking the sleeping beauty awake. "Bara-Mah" is built around an old mode of Indian romantic poetry, in which the love-sick bride, left in the loneliness of her home, or bower, by her Lord, gone to far-away lands in quest of adventure, war or gain, waits for him, in helpless agony of suffering, month after month. Seasons pass, each bringing its particular atmosphere, emphasizing her suffering of loneliness, especially the rainy romantic month of Savan (July-August). At last, after the dark winter, with its long, lonely nights, comes spring in Phalgun (March), bringing union with the Beloved, long sought after. In the original the rhythms are inexpressibly beautiful, casting an enchanting spell over the mind. In intensity of yearning, these poems touch the level of the greatest poetry and should be studied as a hitherto undiscovered portion of the national literature of India.

On the theme of death, in Guru Nanak's poetry is mingled compassion for the state of man and warning to him not to make waste of his life in the pursuit of material objects. Man is helpless before the dictate of fate, marched away by Yama's minions, leaving his sorrowing near and dear ones behind. Tears of grief, hardly suppressed, glisten through these poems. Seldom has a great teacher melted with such compassion for man in the iron grip of death. Yet these poems outline also the path of triumph over tyrannical death, which lies in contemplating in the hour of grief the holy Name of God, realizing universal mortality, and the practice of truth. Inevitable death wears a noble, fulfilling aspect when it is met with devotion and service of humanity. Thus is the sorrowing human heart in its tears and sobs, given the solace, which in the hour of grief is man's main prop.

7

The Moral Quest

At its highest reach religion is the mystical experience, ineffable and indescribable, joy in cosmic harmony, but in its expression in mundane life it must take the form of the moral life. When religion remains indifferent to moral issues, it becomes a kind of inebriation of the mind and is actually a pursuit of values militating against the spirit of humanity. It is in subduing the lower impulses of greed, selfishness, pride, etc., that the spirit of true morality inheres. Not in self-maceration, but in keeping through prayer and devotion the impulsive mind under control lies the essence of morality. Guru Nanak, combining in himself the qualities of a spiritual and moral teacher, has guided man along the path of morality in the spirit of enunciating an uncompromising law of retribution with compassion for the fallen state of man, as through indulgence in passions he rushes to his ruin. This vision, as elsewhere in his teaching, finds expression through striking imagery that instructs while it grips the imagination.

One of the images recurring in Guru Nanak's poetry of moral exhortation is the deer, the lusty buck that running after green shoots gets caught in the hidden snare. The sovereign way of life is that of contentment. Not the path of pleasure, but that of contentment and resignation to the will of God will save man's self from torment and perdition. The deer image occurs in the poem following:

Tūn sunī Harna kaliya

Listen thou black buck, why art thou so absorbed in this orchard?
The fruit of poison tastes sweet for a few days only; then will it begin to torment thee;
This fruit which has intoxicated thee, will then torment; without God wilt thou be in deep suffering.
Pleasure is unstable like the stormy ocean; like the flashing lightning.
None is thy protector except God—Him hast thou forgotten.
Believe Nanak, thou black buck; forget not that thy path is the path of death!
Thou humming-bee, haunting buds, know that pleasure will land thee in severe torment.
Thus asked I the Master to instruct me in the truth;
To instruct me in truth, I supplicated the Master.
My friend humming-bee is sunk in pleasure.
As dawned the day and the body began to decline, pain poured on it like burning oil;
Thou unclean goblin, without the Word, remember that Yama will put thee in bonds and torture thee.
Saith Nanak truly: Remember my soul, my black humming-bee, pleasure will only bring thee to eternal death.
(*Asa Chhant*, pp. 438-39)

This theme of moral teaching is ubiquitous in Guru Nanak's compositions, making them a potent influence in shaping the moral life of man. In the piece following this image is employed with rare effect, combining stern warning with human compassion:

Chanchal cheet na rahaee thāī

The mind, restless, is not fixed in poise;
Like the deer it seeks to nibble at green shoots.
One devoting his heart to God's lotus feet,
lives long and is ever soul-awakened.
The whole world is in anxiety's grip—

Joy comes only from contemplating God.
Should man lodge God in mind, and be absorbed in Him,
Emancipation shall come to him,
And in honour shall he return to his celestial home.

(*Ramkali Dakhni, Oankar* 23, p. 932)

Another image, is that of the humming bee, flitting from flower to flower after sensuous pleasure. This image, well-known in Indian thought, is woven in the poem given above. The "shoots", of course, are symbolic, standing for the inclination towards pleasure-seeking, the life of the voluptuary, unmindful of consequences and of moral responsibility.

Similar is the adjuration in the piece following, with multiple symbolism. The "five birds" on the tree are man's five senses. In some are they greedy, avaricious. They run into suffering. The contented and the poised ones get Divine grace and liberation, which is the supreme objective of man's existence. This piece, part of a long philosophical disquisition, entitled *Oankar* in *Ramkali Dakhni*, runs in translation as below:

Taruvar kaiya pankhi mana taruvar pankhee panch

This body is a tree; the mind, a bird—
On this tree are perched five birds.
Such of these as pick up the Essence,
Get not caught in the snare.
Those rushing around, seeking plenty of grain
Find their wings broken,
Are caught in the snare,
And involved in great suffering.
From the snare no escape comes except by God's grace—
The jewel of God-realization, by Divine grace, is attained.
The mighty Provider alone may bestow liberation.
By Divine grace and compassion may liberation be attained.
All merit in His grasp, lies—
This may be attained only as He wills it.

(*Oankar* 33, p. 934)

Man, burdened with the lower impulses and sin, is like a ship laden with poison, tossed on the sea of existence. On this sea, God's holy Word alone is the pilot, rowing the self ashore to attain the goal of liberation.

The Ship of Life

Bikh bohithā lādiya diyā samund majhār

Man's life is a poison-laden ship, tossed into the sea;
Of this sea the shore is invisible, this side or the other;
Neither has it a rowing pole, nor is a pilot visible on this terrible vast sea.
Friend, the world is caught in a mighty net;
Only by Divine grace and meditating on the holy Name,
May man survive.
God is the ship, the holy Word the pilot.
Where God's Word is, neither wind, nor fire, nor waves,
Nor any frightful forms have power;
There the holy eternal Name alone abides,
Which carries man across the ocean of worldliness.
Those going over it, by divine grace win the other shore,
Engrossed, in devotion to the Eternal;
Their transmigration is ended,
Their light is merged into the light of the Infinite.
Through divine guidance comes realization,
And the self merges into the Eternal.
A snake enclosed in a basket will still carry poison and evil in its nature:
What is destined for it, from the primal hour, may not be averted—
On whom may the blame be cast?
By divine grace is found the antidote to such poison—
Such antidote is to put faith in the Name,
And to seek contentment.

(*Maru*, p. 1009)

Life is beset with dangers for the soul. In the world are four

"rivers of fire" into which the self may fall. These must be avoided:

Châri nadi agni asrâl

Four* are the fearful rivers of fire—
Only the man of God has understanding of the Word celestial.
The unbeliever caught in false notions is consumed—
Only the Master saves him who is dyed in God's love.

(*Maru Solahe* 11, p. 1031)

This body is soaked in Maya, that is, sin. In a beautiful lyric Guru Nanak contrasts the false dye of Maya with the dye of God, that is devotion:

Eh tan Maya pahiya piyare leetra labb rangai

Beloved mine, this body is soaked in Maya,
The dye of greed is on it;
This vesture pleases not my Spouse—how may I enter His couch?
May I be a sacrifice, a sacrifice again and again
To those who meditate on Thee —
To them may I be a sacrifice!
The best of all dyes is the fast dye of God:
Such a glowing dye one never has seen.

(*Telang*, p. 721)

For man the way to avoid sin and suffering is to bear in mind the fear of God. The whole universe is seen operating in such fear in a mighty cosmic vision. In the disquisitional composition, *Asa-ki-Var* occurs this passage:

Bhay vich pawan wahai sad wâu

In fear of God the air blows in innumerable currents;

*These are mentioned as violence, attachment, greed and wrath (*hans, het, lobh, kop.*)

In fear flow millions of streams;
In fear fire performs its service;
In fear is the earth pressed under its burden,
In fear moves Indra in utter humility.
In fear sits the Celestial Judge in his court.
Sun and moon move about in fear,
And traverse millions of *kosas* without limit.
In fear pray mystics, enlightened ones, gods and Yogis.
In fear are the heavens spread.
Heroes of mighty force too are in fear of Him.
In fear pass the millions through birth and death.
The writ of fear governs all creation.
Nanak, only the Formless Eternal is free from fear.

(*Var Asa* 4, p. 464)

For the suffering brought on by sin there is only one remedy: devotion to the Name Divine. Here a figure from the practice of medicine is used. Suffering is the poison; its antidote devotion to the Name of God:

Dukh mahura maran Hari-Nam

Sorrow is the poison—God's Name is the substance to transmute it into joy;
This chemical substance may be pulverized on the stone of contentment, with the hand of charity;
One constantly taking this elixir shall not suffer pain of dissolution,
And in the end will spurn the terrors of death.

(*Raga Malar* 9, pp. 1256-57)

8

The Voice of Compassion

Man, caught in the snare of worldly pleasures, oblivious of old age and death, has touched the Guru's heart as it had that of the Buddha two thousand years before him. To convey to man the spectacle of inevitable dissolution and death, of which engrossed in the course of pleasure he is all too forgetful, Guru Nanak has employed one of the poetic conventions, called *Pahre* (The Hours). The span of man's life is divided into four parts, each called a *Pahra* or *Pahar* (a unit of time equalling three hours). In a vision that embraces the entire course of man's life, he has recounted man's experiences in the various stages of his life, which is a flux, as against man's illusion of stability and permanence of youth and joy. In the *Raga Sri* there are, as in a symphony, two movements of this theme. These are given below in English rendering. Man is apostrophized as merchant (*Ynajara*), an itinerant trader who traverses the course of life making gain or loss, as he engages in doing good or remaining thoughtless and indifferent to devotion and morality. Here then, is the spectacle of life's night passed by man as may be his inclination or destiny.

Pahre

FIRST MOVEMENT

Pahlai pahrai rayn kai vanjariya mitra Hukami paiya garbhas

In the first hour of the night, my Merchant-Friend, by divine will wast thou cast into the womb;
Suspended by the head, didst thou undergo penance therein—supplicating the Master for release:
Suspended downward didst thou supplicate and absorb thy thought in the Master.
Camest thou in shame into the world; unclad shalt thou return.
Man gets what is writ in his destiny.
Saith Nanak, in the first hour was man cast in the womb.

(1)

Dujai pahrai rayn kai Vanjariya mitra Visar gaya dhiyan

In the second hour of night, Merchant-Friend, hast thou put God out of mind.
By diverse hands wast thou fondled with love as Krishna in the home of Yasoda.
By diverse hands fondled, thou bubble of breath, thy mother showered love on thee;
Think, think thou involved in forgetfulness, nothing shall last with thee:
He who created thee, Him hast thou forgotten—contemplate Him with thy mind.
Saith Nanak, in the second hour hast thou put God out of mind!

(2)

Tijai pahrai rayn kai vanjariya mitra dhan joban sium chitt

In the third hour of night, Merchant-Friend, thy heart on wealth and desire is fixed;
Thou thinkst not of God, liberator from bondage.

Forgetful of God, thou wanderest in Maya's maze.
Lured by wealth and drunk in desire, thou hast cast thy life away.
Thy merchandise has not been Righteousness; nor Friend, hast engaged in good deeds.
Saith Nanak, in the third hour is man absorbed in wealth and desire.

(3)

Chauthai pahrai rayn kai Vanjariya mitra lavi alya khet

In the fourth hour of night, the Reaper comes to the field,
Led by Yama's minions, Merchant-Friend, none thy destination knows.
In the grip of Yama's minions, none knoweth the why or where.
Victims of illusion would cry round the bier—in a moment wouldst thou, a stranger, be cast off.
Thy attainment would be as thy desire in life.
Saith Nanak: Listen thou man! in the fourth hour the Reaper comes to reap the field.

(4)

SECOND MOVEMENT

Pahlai pahrai rayn kai Vanjariya mitra balak buddhi achet

In the first hour of night, Merchant-Friend, is the infant in ignorance engulfed;
He sucks milk, is fed and, Merchant-Friend, wrapped in the affection of mother and father;
Mother and father hold the infant in affection abounding—all Maya's illusion.
Good fortune has brought him the human incarnation, reward of good deeds—now again involved in a round of action:
Emancipation may come not without devotion to God—attachment to world is perdition.
Saith Nanak in the first hour: Man, meditate on God—that alone may bring liberation.

(1)

Dujai pahrai rayn kai Vanjariya mitra bhar joban mai mati

In the second hour of night, Merchant-Friend, art thou intoxicated with the wine of youth, full to brim;
Day and night pursuing desire, Merchant Friend, in blindness minding not God.
Thy mind forgetful of God, absorbed in pleasures sweet and sour.
Without enlightenment, meditation, inclination to restraint—wrapped in falsehood, shall your birth and death be unending.
Ablutions, fasts, codes of purification,
Ritual actions—not these the worship:
Saith Nanak: Emancipation follows love and devotion—in dualism lies transmigration.

(2)

Tijai pahrai rayn kai vanjariya mitra sari hans ulathrei aiye

In the third hour of night, Merchant-Friend, swans settle on the pool's marge—
Youth melts, Old Age wins, Merchant-Friend; life runs out, day declines.
In the last hour, thou blind of sight, shalt thou repent, gripped by Yama's minions;
All thy coveted possessions in a moment shall fall away from thee.
Thoughtless and foolish, evil deeds shall bring thee only regret.
Saith Nanak: Listen Man, in the third hour deeply meditate on God.

(3)

Chauthai pahrai rayn kai Vanjariya mitra birdh bhaiya tan khin

In the fourth hour of night, Merchant-Friend, shalt thou grow old, thy limbs enfeebled;
Thy eyes deprived of sight, thy ears dead to sound—

Eyes blinded, palate gone tasteless; thy strength and effort gone:
How may one without merit get joy? For the unbeliever is transmigration.
The crop ripened, snaps and falls—in the hour of departure, pride all snaps broken.
Saith Nanak: Man, in the fourth hour seek Divine grace to know Him.

(4)

Orak aiya tin sahiya vanjariya mitra jar jarwana kanh

At last comes breathing to end, Merchant-Friend;
Old age of great might stands at thy shoulder.
My Merchant-Friend, thou didst not absorb a grain of merit; thy demerits shall haul thee away bound!
Whoever through restraint has garnered merit shall not suffer; nor be born and die.
Death and Yama's snare touch him not; through loving devotion and fear he swims across.
With honour he departs and in the Supreme, in God is absorbed—all his sorrows annulled.
Saith Nanak: Listen man! by Divine grace does man find liberation; from the Eternal finds honour.

(5)

This theme is also treated in a long sequence in the *Raga Wadhans*, entitled *Alahuniyan* (Dirges), which is a folk form, traditionally employed to mourn the death of dear ones. In the popular tradition it consists of long, melancholy wails, expressive of deep grief and suffering of bereavement in a harsh world. In adapting this form Guru Nanak has not slurred over the fact of death and the suffering it entails to the survivors, but has suggested, as in all great spiritual experience, the way of triumphing over its terror. To one that has lived in the way of God, death does not present a fearful aspect. Through resignation to the Divine Will the survivors too may find solace that brings peace and reconciles man to the inevitable will of God, who makes life and death. The two concluding stanzas of this long poem, expressive of pity at man's suffering and the vision of

reconciliation are given below:

Baba nangara aiya jag mehn dukh sukh lekh likhaiya

Friend! man unclad into the world has come—suffering and pleasure in his destiny recorded.
The union recorded by virtue of former deeds is inescapable.
The holy Eternal in His session recorded for the creature *amrita* and poison—
As God-ordained has it acted:
The witch *maya* casts her spells, putting threads of various hues round its neck.
With its shallow understanding is the creature low of mind,
Greedy like flies on molasses.
Unattended by decencies is it in Kaliyuga born;
unclad is it haled out.

(Stanza 3)

Baba rowuh je kisai rowana janiyara bandh pathaiya hai

Friend! mourn now if mourn you must—the loved one in bonds is led off.
Ineffaceable is recorded writ, as the courier at the door arrives.
As has pleased God, has the courier arrived:
Those that must wail, to wailing have fallen.
Wail sons, brothers, nephews and dearly loving friends.
None for the dead gives up life.
Best it is to mourn in fear of God, recounting His merits.
Saith Nanak: Eternally enlightened is one,
Whose mourning lies in contemplation of truth.

(Stanza 4)

9

The Social Conscience

In our country morality has seldom included general humanitarianism or any idea of social responsibility. The rich have been absolved of sin by dispensing ritual charity, without being questioned as to the source of their wealth. There is a story related of Guru Nanak, illustrative of his keen social conscience which would not compromise on issues of public morality. He was invited to a feast of charity by a rich Hindu, Malik Bhago. After much persuasion he went, but refrained from partaking of the rich fare offered. When pressed, he made it clear that he regarded the rich man's wealth, out of which his charity came, as theft from the poor, on whom levies were laid to supply the various commodities. To illustrate his view-point, he called for a palmful of the rich man's food, dripping with ghee; and the coarse bread of a poor worker. As he squeezed these in his hands, from the rich man's food oozed blood—the blood of the dispossessed poor—while from the poor man's coarse fare came milk, the milk of love.

Guru Nanak denounced in its totality the entire fabric of injustice and tyranny. of the age in which he lived. Castigated are tyrants, both Hindu and Muslim, and the people called upon to engage in obedience to God, the true King and not to be overawed by worldly potentates. While it would not be correct to read in Guru Nanak's teaching a revolutionary gospel as we understand revolution in these times, it had in it the seeds

of a revolution, which took shape in the hands of his followers, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Guru denounced worldly pomp and called upon man to view the marks of mundane glory as a hollow show. Mentioning such glory in a hymn in the *Raga Asa* he warns man against its delusion:

Lakh lashkar lakh vaje neje lakh utth karain salaam

Shouldst thou be lord of vast hosts, bands and lances;
Should all these bow to thee in obedience;
Shouldst thou be master of millions who obey thee and make obeisance to thee—
With all this, shouldst thou not be honoured in the Divine reckoning,
All thy achievement is without worth.
All action but devotion to God is of no value.
One without devotion, with all his learning will remain stark blind.
Should someone earn millions, hold as much,
Consume vast amounts, earn and spend the same—
Without honour in the Divine reckoning, must he wander from birth to birth.
Should man be learned in all the scriptures,
Read and expound them,
Without honour in the Divine reckoning,
Is all his learning unapproved.
Devotion to God comes from grace—
From devotion comes true honour.
Should devotion be lodged day and night in the heart,
Man may through grace be liberated.

(p. 358)

Elsewhere, in *Sri Raga*, he strikes the mind of man with awe at the destructibility of earthly glory:

Raje raiyat sikdar koi na rahasiyo

Kings, subjects, lords—
None shall last;

Rich stores, squares, markets—
All by Divine command shall collapse.
Firm edifices, portals,
The ignorant fool reckons his own—
Not knowing, treasures overflowing with wealth
May in an instant be denuded.
Arab steeds, chariots, camels, elephants, housings,
Gardens, lands, mansions—
All these possessions—
Where are they?
Tents, luxurious beds, damask curtains—
All, all vanished.
Saith Nanak: The Bestower of all alone abides—
By His might may He be known.

(*Vār Majh*, p. 141)

On the corruption and injustice of the age thus he delivered himself:

Lab pap due raje mehta koor hoya sikdar

Avarice is the king; evil-doing his minister,
Falsehood his revenue-factor;
Lust is the counsellor, always consulted for advice,
The subjects are purblind and thoughtless—
Wretches who foolishly obey these evil rulers.

(*Vār Asa*, pp. 468-69)

Quadi koor bolai mala khaye

The Quadi speaks falsehood and eats filth.
The Brahmin, guilty of cruelty, makes a show of ritual bathing.
The Yogi, blind and misguided, knows not the true practice.
All three are at one in bringing harm to the people.

(*Raga Dhanasari*, p. 662)

The Age is turned knife, kings turned butchers,
Righteousness on wings has flown.

This is the dark night of evil,
The moon of truth nowhere is visible.
I have sought to distraction—.
No path in this darkness is visible.

(*Vār Majh*, p. 145)

On the hypocrisy of false religious preachers the Guru thus expressed himself:

Manas khāne karehn nivāj (*namāz*)

Those who slaughter human beings perform *namāz*.
Those wielding the butcher's knife wear the sacred thread.
Brahmins blow the conch-shell in their homes—
These are as much given over to hungers as their employers.
Evil is the capital, evil the commerce of such;
From evil-doing is their living derived.
They put the paste-mark on their foreheads, and wear the ritual *dhoti*,
Yet in their hands they hold the knife and slaughter all they lay hands on.

(*Vār Asa* 16, pp. 471-72)

Charity given by way of propitiation for the souls of one's departed relatives, unless given out of honest earning, is thievery:

Je mohaka ghar muhai ghar moh pitri deai

A robber, who gives away charity out of his booty,
For the benefit of his ancestor's soul—
In the next world the stolen goods will be identified,
And the recipient ancestor be arraigned as thief;
The hands of the middleman who sanctifies such charity will be lopped off in punishment.
Nanak, only that will benefit in the next world which a man gives away from his honest earning.

(*Vār Asa* 17, p. 472)

On the evil of caste distinctions and particularly untouchability, Guru Nanak heralds the modern age of equality of all humanity. He has denounced the arrogance of those calling themselves of the higher castes. In a great gesture of humanity for the poor, he identifies himself with the mass of those condemned as the low-caste:

Neechan andari neech jati neechihun ati neech

The lowest of the low-castes, lower beyond description—
Nanak is with such; he emulates not the great.
Lord! there where the lowly are cherished,
Falls the glance of Thy grace.

(*Sri Raga* 3, p. 15)

The hypocrisy of those calling themselves the high-caste, harbouring evil in their heart, is thus exposed:

Kabuddhi dumani kudaiya kasain

Evil thinking, hard-heartedness, slander, violence—
These be the real untouchables:
How is your cooking space pure with these low-caste women beside you?
True ritual of purity is truthfulness;
Good actions your kitchen-bounds;
Prayer, true holy bath.
Saith Nanak: With God only such are considered noble,
As preach not to others sinful ritual.

(*Vār Sri Rag*, p. 91)

Other pronouncements on caste:

Janau joti na poochho jati agai jati na hai

Know all human beings to be repositories of Divine light;
Stop not to enquire about their caste!
In the Hereafter are there no castes.

(*Raga Asa*, p. 349)

Phakkar jati phakkar naon

Caste is a condemnable notion;
Pride of name is low and mean.
All livings beings have their sole support in God.
(*Sri Raga-ki-Var* 3, p. 83)

Khasam visaraih te kam-jati

Those forgetting the Lord are the truly low-caste.
Nanak, the fallen are those who live without God.
(p. 349)

Agai jati na jor hai

In the Hereafter counts neither caste nor worldly power—
What counts there is purity and not these!
Nanak, they alone are holy whose deeds are entered as such in God's reckoning.
(*Var Asa*, p. 469)

The Brahminical sacred thread (*Janeu*, *Yogyopavit*, *Upanayan*) is a symbol of the purity of life. The true *janeu*, according to Guru Nanak, should thus be twisted:

Daya kapah santokh soot jati gandhi satt vatt

Make compassion the cotton, contentment the yarn;
Give it chastity's twist and knot;
Such is the true thread of the self.
Put such on me, thou Brahmin, shouldst thou have it.
Such thread will neither snap nor be soiled;
Neither burn nor be lost.
Blessed O Nanak, are those who wear round their neck such a thread.
This thread thou givest
Is worth four cowries;
In the kitchen-space is it assumed;
Over the head and ears is it wrapped,
By the Brahmin turned preceptor.

When death comes to the wearer
This thread drops off—
So to the next world he proceeds divested of the thread.

(*Vār Asa* 15, p. 471)

Woman in India through the ages has been the suppressed half of humanity. She has been regarded as the source of sin, the temptress and her very sight corrupting the mind. Guru Nanak in the vast sweep of his compassion defended the right of woman to respectful consideration.

On the superstition, *Sutak*, declaring a house "impure" for forty days after a child-birth, the Guru's liberating teaching is enunciated thus, making impurity inhere in the mind and not in the mere event of birth which occurs by Divine command:

Mana ka sutak lobh hai jihra sutak koor

The Mind's *sutak* is avarice, the tongue's falsehood;
The Eyes's *sutak* is the coveting of the body of another's woman and his wealth;
The Ear's *sutak* is pleasure in hearing slander:
Through such defilement, Nanak, men and their souls are dragged, bound to the city of Yama.
All belief in *sutak* is superstition, born of illusion.
Birth and death come by decree; man comes and goes by His will.
Food and drink is all pure, coming as apportioned by God.
Nanak, those who have acquired awareness of God,
By His grace are not deluded by thought of *sutak*.

(p. 472)

Ritual notions of purity, such as those believed to inhere in holy bath at sacred spots, *tirthas*, are of no avail without the purity of heart:

Nhavan challe tirathin mana khote tan chor

Some go to sacred places for ablutions, with hearts impure and faculties false;

Ablutions wash one part of them; more impurities attach to them again and again.
They wash their bowels from outside; inside is undiluted venom.
The pure in soul are pure even without ritual bathing.
The wicked will be wicked with all ritual performances.

(*Vār Suhī*, p. 789)

In the above only a small portion of the great vision of Guru Nanak taking in its sweep the prevalent corruption on the social scene has found expression. As the social conscience of his times, Guru Nanak is the true harbinger of the modern age, long before liberalism and enlightenment appeared in the thought of the West.

10

The Heart Throbbing for India

Guru Nanak was deeply sensitive to the historical forces and to the issues affecting the welfare of society as a whole. Feudal tyranny was the order of the day. Babar, who was then ruling over Kabul and certain areas of Central Asia, repeatedly invaded India. The Lodhi Pathan rulers were unable to withstand the invaders' onslaught despite the vast resources they could command. As Babar's hordes, consisting of Afghans, Uzbeks, Mongols and other tribes fell upon the helpless people of Punjab, the first region of India that came their way, they slaughtered, burnt and looted indiscrimintely. Neither the Hindus nor the Muslims escaped their depradations. Guru Nanak was obviously a witness to this carnage, and as the story goes, was even taken prisoner during one of the campaigns and made to grind corn for the invaders. Apart from the mass slaughter and burning of whole towns, what touched him deeply was the dishonour of India's women by the marauders. This, the common fate of the women of the vanquished, drew from him a deep cry of anguish. The Guru has expressed the suffering of his heart in four poems included in the Granth Sahib, collectively known as *Babar-Vani* (Babar's Aggression) after a phrase occurring in one of the poems. In one of these he has used for the invaded land the term "Hindustan", indicating his concern for the land as a whole, perhaps the first occasion when a man of God felt for the country and its people as a whole. His soul rises in passio-

nate indignation against the incompetent Lodhis, sunk in sensual pleasures, who could not stand up to the invader, but let their land be ravaged and its women-folk dishonoured. He calls them "dogs" who ruined the jewels that is, India and its people. The poems are remarkable for his denunciation of false necromancers who claimed to drive by their spells the Mughals blind, his deep knowledge of the tactics of war employed by the parties in the combat and his picture of a dishonoured India. His voice arose for the people of India as a whole, both Muslims and Hindus. In present-day parlance this might be called the attitude of patriotism, though the Guru of course, transcended the limits of mere patriotic feelings. His pity and indignation were universal and cosmic. Below are given extracts from these poems, with the one on the dishonouring of India's women full.

Khorasan khasmānā kiya Hindustan darāiya

The Lord protected Khorasan, and subjected Hindus
to terror.
Who shall blame Him for sending the Mughal over th
land in the shape of Yama?
The people wailed in their agony of suffering—didst Thou
feel no compassion for them,
Thou who art Creator of all?
If a powerful foe molests one equally powerful, little
would be there to complain:
But if the ferocious tiger falls upon a herd of kine,
Then must the Master be called to account.
These dogs have thrown away the jewels:
Shameful will be their end;
None will remember them after death.

(*Asa*, p. 360)

Jaisi main awai khasm ki bani taisara Karin gyan ve Lalo

My cherished Beloved, I speak what the Lord prompts
me to utter.
Babar has descended upon India with the wedding party
of lust,

And forcibly demands surrender of India's womanhood.
Decency and Law have hidden themselves;
And evil is strutting about in triumph.
Mohammadan and Hindu priests are discarded, and Satan is making marriages.
The Mohammadan women mutter the Koran, and invoke their God in the hour of distress.
So also are in panic the women of Hindu faith and the lower castes.
Nanak, blood is the theme of the hymnal for such a wedding;
Blood is also the saffron paste to suit it.
In this city of corpses, Nanak sings praises of the Lord, and proclaims His Law.

(*Telang*, p. 722)

"The City of Corpses" may be Lahore to which Guru Nanak referred in the adage: *Lahore shahr zehr qehar sawa pahar* (For one and a quarter *pahars* was Lahore subjected to a terrible massacre).

Jin sir sohani pattiyan mangin pae sandhūr

Finely coiffeured heads, dyed with vermilion
Have been brutally sheared with daggers,
Dragged along in clouds of dust.
Ladies reared up in palaces are now not allowed a moment of rest.
Salutation to Thee, Lord-Creator, Salutation!
Primal *Purusha*!
Thy inscrutable will is unknowable;
Thou dost enact various scenes in this world.
At their wedding these brides,
Now dragged along in disgrace, were by their lords' side,
Were carried home in palanquins ivory-studded,
Blessed with auspicious pitchers of water,
Glamorous fans waving over them;
Rich gifts presented to them at each movement:
Munching rich delectable almonds, dates,

Reclining in soft beds—
Dragged about now in halters,
Their pearl-strings shattered, scattered.
Wealth and beauty have turned deadly foes of those that cherished them.
Commanded the conqueror his minions,
Drag them all in disgrace!
The Lord confers honour
And chastizes as lies in His will.
Man may escape chastizement by thinking of the consequences of his acts.
The rulers lost their senses in pleasure and frivolity.
Now was Babar's command supreme:
Snatch each morsel from these pampered princelings!
Some their namaz-prayer missed;
Others their temple-worship.
For the Hindu women no purified fireplace, no paste-marks, ritual bathing.
In days gone by they thought not on Rama;
Now even utterance of Khuda is forbidden them.
A rare one that returned safe,
Others plied him with questions about their dear ones' safety;
For others destiny decreed lamentation alone in sorrow.
Nanak! all happens as He wills;
What is helpless man?

(*Asa*, p. 417)

Is zar karan ghani vigutti in zar karan ghani khuwai

Vast multitudes have fallen from grace for lucre,
Been sequestered from God:
It comes not except through sin,
And accompanies not man in death.
The Creator, whosoever He has to forsake,
Deprives him first of goodness.
Swarms of hermits plied spells to thwart the conqueror's advance;
As news spread of him.
Sacred spots of Hindus and Muslims—

Firm stone edifices—nonetheless were burnt.
Princes cut to pieces wept in their affliction.
Not one Mugal was struck blind;
Not one hermit prophesied such devastation.
Battle was joined between Mughals and Pathans;
Freely were the swords plied in battle.
These fired volleys of cannon;
Those led elephant-charges.
Swarms of females—Hindus, Muslims, Bhattis, Rajputs—
Many were in tatters from head to foot;
Many found abode in cremation-yards.
Many whose hero-spouses returned not home,
How passed their nights of sorrow?

(*Asa*, pp. 417-18)

For the people of India the lesson enshrined in these pieces is basically moral: Misery and suffering shall befall those living without devotion to God. The path of sensual pleasure leads only to death. On those made weak by their own indulgence scourges like Babar shall fall. That is the Divine Law. This is the core of Guru Nanak's teaching to his followers: Live in remembrance of God, be of pure character. Thus shall you be able to fight tyrants to protect your life and honour. Else must you remain a prey to their depredations. This is a lesson that humanity even today cannot afford to neglect.

11

Ecstasy of Divine Love

Love is one of the modes in which mystic yearning for union with the source of all existence, called by different names in different traditions, finds expression. This love, known as Bhakti, takes the form of the seeker self imaged as the female in love with the Divine entity, idealized as the beloved male. In the later phases of Indian Bhakti it was symbolized as the love of the milkmaids of Brindavan, particularly Radha, for the Divine youth, the voluptuously handsome Krishna. In other traditions parallel modes of expression may also be met with, as for example in the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament and the Divine Person as the Beloved in Persian mystical poetry. In all these traditions the beloved is figured as possessing ideal beauty and appeal, and the devotee-lover thirsting for union with him.

In Guru Nanak, love for the Divine takes the form of the yearning for union of the love-sick female with the husband gone away to far-off lands for gain or adventure. This passion is redolent of the atmosphere of the Indian woman's lonely days and nights, in her separation from the husband in a village or town, with the monotonous cycle of days and nights continuing endlessly; or, if she be of aristocratic lineage, in a bower in a mansion without hope of his early return. Truly pitiable would be the state of the female in such a situation—without news of the departed husband, amid people seldom sympathetic to her.

Another form that this passion takes would be the indifference of the woman's wedded lord to her charms and solicitude, the reverse of the female's disdainful attitude to the male. To win his love she seeks to bedeck herself, to call forth all the sweetness, the humility in her nature. Such and others are the moods, through which she will be passing. In Guru Nanak's compositions these modes find intense expression, in the language and symbols of mundane love. But all the time the spiritual nature of the passion expressed is clear. Sometimes this mode takes a richly ornate expression; at other times its pathos touches the height of the tragic passion—all indicative of the deep yearning of the soul for union with God.

A study of a few poems expressive of such passion would recall the depth of the mystic yearning. While studying them, their symbolism must no way be lost sight of. This is a passion neither for the divinely splendid Krishna figure, nor for a voluptuously handsome adolescent male as in the mystical poetry of Persia, but for a Husband whose love is intensely sought for. That makes this yearning clean and homely, set in the midst of the Indian domesticity, with the traditional relationships particularly of the Hindu female creeping in.

The human self, conscious of its alienation from God amid the Maya-enveloped world, expresses its loneliness in symbols of domesticity. The two lyrics following may help to illustrate this:

Sun Nah plyare ik benanti meri

Hear, Lord-spouse, my supplication!
Thou art in Thy own abode; in separation am I consumed
to a heap of ashes.
None except one's own gives love—helpless is my state:
I yearn to sip the *amrita* of Thy Name;
With Thy Word, to make my palate sweet!
Besides Thee no friend have I among numerous beings of
the world.
Nanak, I long to return to the Abode,
With the profit of Truth made with wisdom given by
Thee.

(*Raga Tukhari*, p. 1111)

Sun Nah-Prabhujio ekalri ban mahen

Listen Lord-Spouse, this soul is lonely in the widerness!
Beloved mine, indifferent to me, how may I find peace without Thee?
Caught in anguish is the Bride without the Spouse;
Terrible and dark are the nights.
Listen to my supplication;
Sleep comes not to me; ever yearn I for the Spouse.
None consoles me in separation from Him;
In loneliness I cry.
Nanak, the Bride prays for union;
Separation of the Beloved is torment unbearable.

(*Raga Gauri Chhant*, p. 243)

The self, Maya-deluded, is imaged as the bride in the husband's home, whose inmates are indifferent to her comfort and do not keep her company. In a sequence of four lyrics in the *Raga Bilaval*, the unawakened human self is pictured as the sleeping bride, shaken awake by the God, the Lover. In these sublime pieces the sequence of being awakened is expressive of the passion of love for the Lord. Then comes the image of the cool night and happy day, fit background to the joy of youthful love. To the self, still asleep, is made the call to rise, receive the Divine Husband's love: "Wake up thou of lovely eyes." Waking up, she is ushered into her Lord's chamber, to be blessed with his love, the Divine fulfilment. This last lyric may here be set down:

Mahal bulairiai bhagat-sanehi Rama

Thou art ushered into the chamber by thy devoted lover:
Thy soul, God-instructed, alone will last:
This body must vanish.
One who subdues the ego and is absorbed in the Word,
Will know the Lord of the Universe.
With mind unswerving in devotion, know thy Bridegroom.
Thou alone art my support, my Spouse.
On Thee alone I lean for strength.

Nanak, He is true and pure eternally—
God's Word settles at rest all controversy.

(*Raga Bilaval*, pp. 843-44)

In a lyric of mystical passion, scaling the heights of the tragic mood of yearning, the soul's quest is expressed through hopeless groping for union in a dream. Sikh audiences listening to its chanting, have wept over it, catching its deep pathos. This is set down here *in extenso*:

The Love-Dream

Morin run-jhun laiya bhaine Savan aiya

Sister, Savan has come;
The peacocks' enchanting notes are heard.
Thy stabbing looks, Lord, have captivated my passionate heart:
For a sight of Thee, would I cut myself to pieces,
Sacrifice myself to Thy Name.
What pride is in me where Thou art—What pride is mine?
Foolish female, smash thy bangles against thy couch,
Against the poles of thy couch—
With all thy make-up thy Lord favours others.
What worth the bangle-seller, what worth the bangles?
May these arms burn that embrace not the Lord.
All my friends have gone to find love with their spouses;
At what door may I the miserable, find shelter?
Friend mine, so well-mannered am I; yet find I not favour with the Lord.
To see me weep the whole world has wept—wept even the birds of the forest—
He in whose separation I wept is still untouched.
He came to me in dream; with tears were my eyes filled.
Beloved, neither can I come to Thee, nor send to Thee messenger—
Come thou blessed sleep, may be I have His sight in sleep.
Nanak, thou speakest of the Lord—what hast thou to offer Him?

To offer Him my severed head for a seal;
Without this head to serve Him.
How may one not die; not immolate oneself,
With the Lord turned stranger?

(*Wadhans*, pp. 557-58)

This passion finds varied expression in Guru Nanak's poetry of spiritual experience. Its most sustained expression is embodied in a long sequence in *Raga Tukhari*, called *Bara-mah* (Song of the Seasons), a mode adapted from the popular poetry of India. The lonely bride passing through the various seasons of the year gives expression to her suffering, whose barb with each passing season becomes sharper. Particularly intense is the pain of the agreeable month of Savan (July-August) with its plentiful showers and dark clouds. Hard are the long lonely nights of winter to pass. But her devotion in love not remaining unrewarded, at last with Phalgun (February-March), the season of spring, comes to her union. With the earlier month Magh (January-February) begins this wave of joy, which may be set down here:

Magh punit bhayee tirath antar janiya

In Magh am I blessed;
In the mind have I seen His shrine.
Union with the Beloved has come through His grace;
His qualities have I absorbed;
 my being has He permeated.
The Beloved's qualities have entered my soul;
Listen, Thou of loveliness surpassing—
To win Thy pleasure is for me ablutions in sacred waters –
Ganga, Jamuna, the triple Confluence holy, the seven seas all.
Charities, alms-giving, worship—all such
 blessings come from knowing the Lord Supreme—
 Eternal, Immutable.
Saith Nanak: With Magh comes supreme joy:
In worship of the Lord lies ablutions at sixty-eight
 bathing-places.

(p. 1109)

Phalgun mani rahassi prem subhaiya

In Phalgun is the heart joyful, attuned to devotion;
Day and night is it in joy, casting off the ego.
Illusion have I cast off through love of Thee—
Show Thy grace, come back home!
What good to deck myself away from the Spouse,
cast off from His Mansion?
Love of the Spouse is all my ornament—jewels, gold, and silken robes.
Saith Nanak: The Lord has bestowed on her union;
The woman hath found her Spouse and Home.

(*Ibid*)

This section may end with a transcript of the beauty of the Divine Beloved, the supremely ravishing Male:

Tere banke loin dant risala

Lovely Thy eyes, and sweet pearly teeth;
Beautiful profile and long Thy tresses;
Thy limbs moulded all in gold—
Moulded all in gold:
Tell, my maiden-friends, beads of devotion to Him—
So may ye escape the door of the god of death—
listen to this my advice.
Pure shall your souls be – storks shall turn into swans.
Lovely thy eyes and sweet pearly teeth.
Elegant Thy gait; beautiful, sweet Thy words.
Liquid Thy youth; sweet Thy accents as *koktla* chirping.
Measured thy gait like elephant self-bedecked.
Liquid thy youth, self-intoxicated with fulfilled desires;
The Bride, intoxicated with love of the Divine Lord,
Steps about like Ganga-waves.
Submits Nanak, God's slave: Elegant is Thy gait and sweet Thy accents.

(*Wadhans*, p. 567).

12

On Yoga

In Guru Nanak's day, as even today, the various yogic cults were very influential. All kinds of mendicants passed under the generic term *Yogi* or its near equals in delineating the ascetic sects, such as Bairagi, Sanayasi, Avadhut, etc. These were further divided and sub-divided into smaller sects, often warring with one another. On the public mind the Yogis and the other ascetic sects wielded a powerful influence through their occult powers, their claims to work miracles, to arouse the esoteric powers of the self and to show the path to liberation. Most of these claims were false, and their claimants frauds living off the credulity of the common folk. Even among the genuine ascetics, most were engaged in barren austerities and praxis of yoga, cut off from the stream of life of the people. Guru Nanak regarded these austerities as a waste of human effort. Instead, he commended for self-purification the path of *sahaj*, which consisted in absorbing holy teaching, meditation and devotion, followed by *seva* or selfless service of mankind. In the famous text of *Japuji* (21) Guru Nanak has affirmed: *Vin gun kite bhagati na hoe* (Without doing good no true devotion can be). In the course of his journeys, Guru Nanak came across numerous Yogis and visited their centres to hold dialogues with them. On one such occasion he visited a mountain retreat, called Gorakh-mata, in the Pilibhit District of Uttar Pradesh, which later came to be called Nanakmata in memory of his triumphant upholding

of his principles as against the Yogis' creed. A record of this is found in the *Vārs* or Cantos of the poet Bhai Gurudas, a close associate and disciple of Guru Arjan Dev. According to Bhai Gurudas, the Yogis tried to overawe Guru Nanak by the display of their occult powers. Unable to shake him, they plied him with questions about the state of the nether world, that is the plains of India, peopled by the miserable millions crushed under the heels of tyrants and defrauded by false claimants to religion. The Guru replied: "You holy men have hid yourselves in the mountains: Who will then save mankind?" The place of the man of God was with the common, suffering humanity, which he must try to save like the Bodhisattva.

The miracles which the Yogis claimed to perform under the names of Riddhis and Siddhis—esoteric powers acquired through Yoga-praxis—the Guru regarded as irrelevant to the spiritual and moral life. When they asked him to show some miracle, he replied: "Other than devotion to God's holy Name no miracle have I to show." In one of his hymns in the *Raga Majh* (*Majh-ki-Vār*, p. 147) he says:

On Miracles

Pahiran agni hival ghar bandhan bhojan sar karai

Were I to wear the vesture of fire, lodge in a house of snow and feed on iron;
Were I to drink universal suffering like water at a gulp and drive the earth about;
Were I to weigh the heavens in balance, against an ounce-weight;
Were I to expand beyond the limits of earth and heaven, and bring all under my sway;
Were my will to be omnipotent,
And bind the universe in obedience—
What then?
Mighty is the Lord, and great His gifts!
Saith Nanak, His greatest gift in His grace
Is the greatness of devotion to His Name.

(*Raga Majh*, p. 147)

The Yogi's accoutrement of earrings, ashes rubbed on the body, patched cloak, staff, etc., the Guru seeks to transmute into spiritual and moral qualities, as the Brahminical Yogyopavit he has transmuted. In Stanza 28 of *Japuji* he thus commends such transmutation:

Mundā Santokhu saramu patu jholi Dhyān kī kareh bibhuti

Make contentment thy earrings; modesty thy begging-bowl
 and pouch;
Contemplation thy ashes.
Make thy quilt from realization of thy mortality, and thy
 body pure of defilement;
Thy code and staff, faith in God.
Let all mankind be Thy sect.
Conquering thus thyself, mayst thou be lord of the world.
Salutations to Him—the Primal, Immaculate, Eternal,
 Immortal—
Immutable through all time.

This is followed by three other stanzas on related aspects. Elsewhere, in *Raga Suhi*, he has dilated on the same theme:

Jog na khintha jog na dandai joh na bhasam charhaeeyai

Yoga lies not in the begging-pouch, in carrying a staff;
Nor in smearing the limbs with ashes,
Yoga lies not in earrings or in cropping close the hair;
Or in blowing the horn.
To live immaculate amidst the impurities of the world—
This is true Yoga-practice:
Perfection in Yoga lies not in bragging.
The true Yogi is one who views in all existence harmony.
Yoga consists not in wandering in cremation spots, nor in
 falling into trances:
Nor lies not in wandering about the world, nor in ritual
 bathing.
To live immaculate amidst the impurities of the world—
This is true Yoga-practice.
Illusions are shattered through spiritual contact with the
 true Preceptor,

And the wandering mind is restrained.
From the spring showers *amrita*;
Celestial harmony is heard, and God-realization arises from the soul.
To live immaculate amidst the impurities of the world—
This is true Yoga-practice.
Nanak, achieve such Union as may bring about the cessation of passions;
Unstruck celestial harmony may be heard—
Then may ye claim to attain the state of complete poise.
To live immaculate amidst the impurities of the world—
This is true Yoga-practice.

(*Raga Suhi*, p. 780)

To Guru Nanak the essence of Yoga, should it be genuinely practised, would lie in the stilling of the passions of the heart, for which Guru Nanak has used the symbol of the lotus, which while remaining in water, is yet untouched by it. Thus must the true Yogi live, as also said in the hymn just quoted, live unpolluted among the impurities of the world. The lotus as a symbol of purity is part of the ancient tradition of thought in India and is found used in the Gita (V. 10) and other ancient writings.

Ritual mendicancy is disapproved by Guru Nanak. He says:

Guru-pir sadae mangan jae

One who claims to be a saint,
And goes about begging—
Touch not his feet!
He whose livelihood is earned through work,
And part given away in charity—
Such a one, Nanak! truly knows the way to God.

(*Var Sarang*, p. 1245)

Guru Nanak's vision is partly being realized these days by the rise of such sects as the Ramakrishna Mission, which make the spiritual life centre in devoted service to mankind. Among the Sikhs, Guru Nanak's followers, such service as suggested earlier is essential for earning spiritual merit. Guru Nanak's message thus is suited to our age wherein service of man is given the prime importance in social and ethical thought.

13

The Path of Spiritual Ascent

According to Guru Nanak's teaching, man must bring the wild impulses of his mind, leading to sin, under control. This is a hard discipline entailing prayer and subordination of the ego to the dictates of God. To emphasize the difficulty of the task involved, Guru Nanak has employed the simile of the roaming, wild elephant in the forest of Maya or worldly attractions for the mind, which only holy teaching can bring under control. In a deeply reflective poem, he has thus expressed himself on this theme:

Man maingal sakat dewana

The mind is a wild elephant,
Wandering bewildered in the forest of Maya delusion.
Worldly objects drive him about.
By the Preceptor's teaching he, however, may seek his true home.
Without the discipline of the Preceptor's Word the mind finds no rest:
Devote yourselves to the immaculate name of God;
Discard bitter-tasting egoism!
The mind, thoughtless, how may it be restrained?
Unless it realizes the Truth, Yama's chastisement it mu' endure.

The Master is Himself liberator and maker of union with Himself.
Destroyer of the torment of death and upholder of Right.
(*Asa*, p. 415)

Desire is what leads man away from the path of godliness and man is awakened to God by discarding desire and avarice.

Ihu mana raja lobhiya lubhato lobhai

The mind is an avarcious king, ever pursuing attractions;
By turning to God this avarice is discarded,
And one is in tune with Him.
Sowing in alkaline soil what profit?
The egoist loves not truth,
And keeps stuck in falsehood.
Ye of no vision! discard avarice—
Avarice the source of great torment.
(*Asa* p. 419)

In another telling simile, Guru Nanak has characterized the worldly attitude as being crow-like, swooping on the offal of worldly pleasures. This instructive piece runs as below:

Jag kauwwa Nam nahin cheet

Mankind is crow-like, forgetful of Truth;
Forgetting Truth, on crumbs it swoops down.
The mind strays ever in impure thoughts.
I have broken free of false love of the world.
Lust and wealth are poisons—heavy and hard.
Without absorption in Truth how may one acquire noble qualities?
This life is a house of sand built on a whirlpool;
Like a bubble just visible in torrential rain.
In substance a drop, moulded in form on God's wheel;
Know all life to be slave to the Real.
(*Raga Basant*, p. 1187)

That the truly devoted self may be characterized not by

observing ritual piety but by confirming truth in the mind and by the exercise of charity and human compassion is seen thus:

Sach ta par janiyai ja ridai sacha hoi

He alone is truly pure whose heart is pure;
Who sheds the filth of falsehood,
And through self-purification makes his body chaste.
He alone is truly pure who loves truth;
One whose heart joys in God's Name shall alone attain the Door of Liberation.
He alone is truly pure who knows the practice of the pure life:
After preparing the soil of the self
Should he sow in it devotion to the Creator.
He alone is truly pure who receives the true precept,
Is full of compassion and gives away his substance in charity.
He alone is truly pure who takes his abode in the pilgrim-spot of his self,
And taking the Master's precept abides therein.
Truth is the sovereign medicine—
All evil it drives out.
Nanak seeks the grace of those
Whose hearts are pure, truthful.

(*Var Asa*, p. 468)

In a deeply devotional mood thus does Guru Nanak characterize the human life full of sinful desire. Here again is a telling simile, that of a heavily laden boat, tossing precariously on the waves.

Hum dolat beri pap bhari hai pawan lagai matu jaee

I, a sin-laden boat tossed about in the storm,
In fear of sinking with every gale:
For a sight of Thee have I come.
Lord of all bliss!
Exalt me with the blessing of faith.
May I be a sacrifice to Thee!

Grant me Thy devotion, Thou who art perfect,
immortal.

(*Ramkali* 6, p. 878)

Forgiveness and compassion are the sovereign qualities of a truly religious life. Hard-hearted tyrants, arrogant wielders of cruel power find not approval with God. In great humility of spirit does Guru Nanak thus express this attitude of mind:

Khima gahi brat seel santokham

God's devotees have taken the vow of forgiveness,
Noble conduct and contentment:
On this path are they exempt from maladies and Yama's malice,
And are liberated, merged in God who is without form or feature.

(*Gauri*, p. 225)

Khima vihune khap gae khuhani lakh asankh

Those who abjured forgiveness, despite their cohorts were effaced from the earth,
Countless their number,
Hard to enumerate.
He who realizes the Master is liberated, never again to be bound
To know the true Word is to be accepted in the celestial mansion.
True joy comes from forgiveness and truthful living.
Expend ye the true wealth of meditation;
Attain thus the poised mind.
Repeat ever God's Name with your mind, body, and tongue:
Thus may ye cultivate noble qualities and a mind forbearing.
Egoism shall be destroyed and destroy its possessor;
Its seed must sprout into worthless weeds.
God, who created all creatures, has put Himself into each;
Yet is He apart from all.

- (*Oankar*, Stanza 49, p. 937)

The undeniable truth of life is suffering, as the Buddha discovered long centuries back. Man in his life is constantly trying to avoid suffering, yet involvement with worldly objects continues to pile up heaps of suffering. Guru Nanak has deeply probed the secret of transmuting life's suffering into joy in God. In some telling figures thus he has adumbrated this theme. The first figure is that of the lamp which is life, kept alight by the oil of suffering.

Diva mera Ek Nam dukh vich paiya tel

Devotion to God's Name is my lamp;
In this lamp is put the oil of suffering;
The light of God's Name burns away that oil,
Annulling Yama's encounter.
Listen, people of the world!
Lest any carp at his faith:
Vast loads of firewood are reduced to ashes by a tiny spark of fire.
Devotion to God is my ritual charity;
God's holy Name my ceremonial;
In this life and the next, this alone is my sustenance.
Lord! Thy laudation to me is the holy Ganga and Banaras,
Wherein my soul takes the holy dip.
True holy bathing is when devotion to God abides in the heart day and night.
Brahmins partake of charities offered to the gods and what is offered to departed ancestors.
Saith Nanak: The charity of God's grace is an inexhaustible store.

(*Raga Asa*, p. 358)

Guru Nanak's sensitiveness to human suffering is a truly remarkable aspect of his total awareness. He is aware of the palpable nature of suffering that the sensitive human flesh must undergo. This suffering is overcome by seeking Divine Grace, as man engages in prayer with a sincere heart:

Dukh vichhora ik dukh bhukh

The greatest of all sufferings is separation from God;
Another is the suffering from hunger and poverty;
Next is the suffering from the tyrant-aggressor.
These are maladies, fatal to the body.
Thou simple-minded physician, attempt not a cure!

(*Raga Malhar*, p. 1256)

In another poem, life is figured as a house made of suffering. This house of suffering too may be converted into an abode of joy through devotion, seeking a life of purity:

Dukh darwaza roh rakhwala asa andesa doi patt jare

Sorrow is its gate; violence its door-keeper;
Panels of hope and fear are fixed in it.
A moat full of the water of illusion surrounds it
This house is built on water:
Man may find a resting place in it
Only on the seat of purity.

(*Raga Ramkali*, p. 877)

Death, the last scene in a life of suffering, presents an aspect of terror. Guru Nanak exhorts man to overcome this terror by investing the act of dying with the pursuit of noble ideals. No terror remains for those whose lives are approved in the eyes of God.

Maran na manda loka akhiyai je koi mar janai

Listen people of the world! dying is not an evil,
Should one only know how to die:
Blessed is the death of heroic men,
Should they meet it in an approved cause.

(*Alahuniyan*, p. 579)

Guru Nanak has called himself a *dhadi* or minstrel of God. *Dhadi* is a caste of itinerant singers of ballads, not held high in the social scale. To sing the lays of God must Guru Nanak

transform himself into His minstrel, like the *dhadis* waiting around the courts of worldly potentates. Only he will wait on the Ultimate Court:

Haun dhadi vekar karai laiya

Me, an idle minstrel hast Thou given a task to perform:
By Ordinance Primal was I assigned to chant
Thy praises night and day.
The Lord summoned the minstrel to His eternal Mansion.
The minstrel chanted lays of His glory and was honoured with a robe.
The Eternal Name immortalizing was his meat and drink.
By Divine prompting was he filled with it, and felt blessed.
The minstrel chanted the True Word in ecstasy infinite.
Nanak! through His praise is joy in the Lord
Immaculate attained.

(*Vār Majh*, p. 150)

Pronunciation Key

Word as spelt in text	*Phonetic spelling*	*Devnagari parallel*
Nanak	**Naanak**	नानक
Japu	**Japu**	जपु
Mūl Mantra	**Mool Mantra**	मूल मंत्र
Hukam	**Hukam**	हुकम
Jati pahārā	**Jati paahaaraa**	जति पहारा
Dhiraj Suniyār	**Dheeraj Suniyaar**	धीरज सुनियार
Sloka	**Śloka**	श्लोक
Ramkali	**Raamkalee**	रामकली
Maru Solahe	**Maaroo Solahe**	मारू सोलहे
Asa	**Aasaa**	आसा
Var	**Vaar**	वार
Malar	**Malaar**	मलार
Chhant	**Chhant**	छन्त
Pahre	**Pahray**	पहरे
Wadhans	**Waḍhans**	वडहंस
Tukhari	**Tukhaari**	तुखारी
Bilaval	**Bilaaval**	बिलावल
Gauri	**Gauḍi**	गउड़ी
Bara-Maha	**Baara-Maaha**	बारामाहा (बारामासा)
Vaisakh	**Vaisaakh**	वैसाख
Chet	**Cheit**	चेत (चैत)
Savan	**Saavan**	सावन
Bhadon	**Bhaadon**	भादों
Māgh	**Maagh**	माघ
Phalgun	**Phaalgoon**	फाल्गुन
Manas Khane	**Maanas Khaane**	मानस खाने
Shikdar	**Shikdaar**	शिकदार
Sutak	**Sootak**	सूतक
Alāhaniyān	**Alaahneeyaan**	अलाहनीयां
Kirtan Sohila	**Keertan Sohilaa**	कीर्तन सोहिला
Tarāji	**Taraajee**	तराजी
Tula	**Tulaa**	तुला

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Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, was among the great spiritual teachers of medieval India. His mission was to reconcile the warring faiths, whose mutual conflict had reduced the state of society in India to a sorry spectacle. His message was to seek behind rituals and conventional appearances the core of each faith, the essence of God-consciousness, the way to a noble life and the brotherhood of man. Tolerance towards other faiths, compassion for the suppressed and a passionate plea for a just society are his basic tenets. He remains pre-eminent in his vision of an integrated life of action, spiritually and ethically directed, and of a society purged of the evil both of a selfish priest craft and grasping temporal overlords.

Guru Nanak's teachings, preserved in the form of devotional poetry in medieval Hindi and Punjabi, sung in various ragas, form a valuable part of the total heritage of Indian literature.

Prof. Gurbachan Singh Talib (b. 1911) is a distinguished scholar, writer and critic in Punjabi and English, and has been associated with many learned bodies. His published works include *An Pachhate Rah* and *Punjabi Vartak* in Punjabi and *Guru Nanak – His Personality and Vision, Selections from the Holy Granth, Japuji – the Immortal Prayer Chant,* and *Guru Teg Bahadur—Martyr and Teacher* in English. Prof. Talib presents this monograph mainly for the benefit of the non-Punjabi readers.

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